



A two-way path: State-driven and bottom-up social change in contemporary Arab Gulf monarchies

European View

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Abstract

The Arab Gulf monarchies have long been subject to reductive narratives and pervasive stereotypes which have often portrayed the region as unchanging, hierarchical and resistant to reform. Such simplifications overlook the complex dynamics that shape these societies. This article explores the two-way path of transformation that is taking place in the Gulf: state-driven initiatives aimed at social reform, and bottom-up forces that are challenging, adapting and influencing these top-down strategies. By examining the interplay between these forces, the article aims to uncover the nuanced processes that are driving change in a region often misunderstood as monolithic.

Keywords

Gulf, Gulf Cooperation Council, Social change, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman

Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula has always been a region highly susceptible to stereotypes and oversimplifications. ‘Pearls, pirates and petroleum’: this is how Sir Charles Belgrave summed up the story of the Gulf in his speech at the Royal Central Asian Society on 28 June 1967, upon winning the Lawrence of Arabia medal (Rahman and Al-Azm 2023). Sixty years later, our understanding of the Gulf has significantly improved, but essentialising perspectives and reductive stereotypes persist.¹

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Two main factors contribute to the persistence of essentialist biases with regard to the Arab Gulf monarchies: oil-centric interpretations of social phenomena in the region and immobility biases.

Some thinkers from the Gulf suggest that reductionist approaches have prospered not only because of oil-centric interpretations, but also because the *khaleeji* (lit. from *Khalij*, the Gulf) identity has always been under-theorised due to the excessive influence of oil on the conceptualisation of the politics and society of the Gulf.

Today more than ever, *khaleeji* societies are being built around a new *khaleeji* economy, which is neither exclusively oil-based nor entirely rentier (Abdulla 2024, 1). The Arab Gulf monarchies are crafting their own version of modernity in which the private sector is thriving, welfare subsidies are being reduced and substantial investments are being made in green energy. The rentier state model that dominates scholarly literature on the Gulf has often oversimplified past *khaleeji* societies and misrepresented contemporary ones.

The second factor fostering oversimplified approaches to Gulf societies is what can be termed the *immobility bias*—the assumption that, as absolute monarchies in which social freedoms are still severely limited, these societies are inherently incapable of meaningful social change. On the contrary, a lot is going on and the region is far from immune to social evolutions. The first two decades of this century have seen a rapid acceleration of these changes, affecting all aspects of life within these societies.

This article aims to scrutinise the complex relationship between bottom-up and top-down social change in the Arab Gulf monarchies, offering an overview of the major trends in both directions. The first section will focus on the aforementioned dynamics, analysing the interactions between top-down initiatives and grass-roots trends and forces, with a particular emphasis on the national visions for the future and the issues related to human rights, migrant labour and national identity.

The second part will be entirely dedicated to the evolution of gender roles in the Gulf region, an area that is critical to understanding broader social change. Gender roles serve as a significant indicator of the transformation of societal norms and values, reflecting both state-driven reforms and shifts in public sentiment. Examining these changes will not only highlight the progress made but also underscore the ongoing challenges that still need to be addressed.

A two-way path: state-driven initiatives and bottom-up transformation

Social change refers to the transformation of socio-cultural structures and relationships over time. It occurs at various levels of society and may be driven by shifts in values, technology, institutions, or individual and collective actions.²

In the Arab Gulf monarchies, a complex interplay exists between state-driven and bottom-up social change. State-driven social change refers to top-down initiatives led by the ruling authorities to shape societal structures and norms. Bottom-up social change, on the other hand, emerges from grass-roots actions, driven by communities, individuals or non-state actors, and reflects localised grievances, aspirations and social dynamics. In the Gulf region, the interplay between these two forces is particularly complex. While state-driven change has been instrumental in advancing economic diversification and gender equality, bottom-up movements often highlight underlying tensions, advocate for cultural preservation or push for more inclusive participation in shaping societal futures.

Western-centric approaches to social change in the Gulf often depict top-down reforms as mere brainwashing, but the reality is far more complex. The personalisation of power, a mechanism that is ingrained in Gulf political culture and based on which the ruler embodies the state and its institutions, is achieved through pervasive narratives that emphasise the leader's greatness and identification with the homeland. While this may appear to be an exclusively top-down process, there is an undeniable element of gratitude from the people to the ruler that should not be overlooked.

This gratitude stems from witnessing the Gulf's rapid transformation—from a harsh desert environment to one where the most luxurious lifestyles globally can be enjoyed—within just two generations.³ Urbanisation, especially since 2000, has had an irreversible impact on Gulf societies. The construction of modern cities and neighbourhoods, some on reclaimed land, has had an impact on traditional social patterns, including family structures, and introduced new forms of relationships. The oil booms of the 1970s catalysed changes in housing, state support and access to modern media, exposing Gulf societies to new ideas about gender roles, family and sexuality—an evolution now accelerated by social media (Rahman and Al-Azm 2023, 52). As Abdulla notes, the Gulf States have experienced more changes in the past 50 years than in their 500 years of recorded history (Abdulla 2011, 114).

Yet, Gulf societies also exhibit strong counterforces of continuity that resist transformation. What Peterson aptly describes as 'social continuity' is upheld by deep-rooted social conservatism, supported by religious, tribal and other socio-cultural identities (Peterson 2014). In this context, the Arab Gulf monarchies do push for change, but advocate firmly for *evolution* rather than abrupt *revolution*.

Nowadays, top-down change and bottom-up trends interact with a special energy among the younger generation, a significant portion of which consists of university graduates, many of whom have attended prestigious universities in the West. This generation is highly attuned to the global landscape, engaging with international values, ideas and debates. Young people are also prominent consumers of the latest technologies, active creators of art and entertainment⁴ in the framework of unique interactions between strong national brands—especially in the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia—and hold cosmopolitan views.

Gulf visions

The Gulf visions, spearheaded by the national governments, present ambitious top-down frameworks designed to modernise their economies, diversify industries and reshape societal norms. These strategic plans aim to catalyse transformative change, often introducing reforms to gender roles, youth empowerment and cultural openness. In turn, these state-led initiatives spark bottom-up trends, as individuals and communities adapt, respond, and contribute their own ideas and efforts, creating a dynamic interplay between governance and grass-roots developments.

The most renowned of these visions is Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, launched in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman as a comprehensive reform plan based on three themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. The vision encompasses an extremely wide selection of initiatives, ranging from those in favour of the diversification of the economy and the Saudisation of the workforce, to those dedicated to tourism, art and culture.

Vision 2030 is not merely an economic reform plan; it also aspires to bring about significant social transformation. By aiding homeownership,⁵ promoting cultural activities, encouraging more active lifestyles and opening new venues for entertainment, the vision aims to enhance the overall quality of life for Saudi citizens.⁶

Little Sparta—as the UAE is nicknamed due to its assertiveness and strategic capabilities, despite being a relatively small nation—recently celebrated the completion of its Vision 2021 strategy. This focused on making the UAE one of the best countries in the world by its fiftieth anniversary in 2021, emphasising the country's innovation, knowledge economy and sustainability. Now the focus has moved to the UAE Centennial 2071, a longer-term plan that envisages the country as a global leader in education, economics and happiness by 2071 (UAE n.d.).

Qatar's National Vision 2030, launched in 2008, outlines a strategy for sustainable development across four pillars: human, social, economic and environmental. Key social change initiatives include investments in institutions such as Education City and programmes to prepare the Qatari youth for global leadership (Government of Qatar n.d.).

Kuwait's Vision 2035, titled 'New Kuwait', aims to transform the country into a regional financial and cultural hub by emphasising economic diversification and national human capital development (Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030 focuses on creating a robust private sector, reducing government dependency and promoting equality, sustainability and competitiveness (Government of Bahrain n.d.).

Even Oman has its own Vision 2040, launched by Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, which focuses on sustainable development, economic diversification—an imperative that is inevitably shared by all the Arab Gulf monarchies—and enhancing citizens' quality of life, mainly by training and educating citizens for private-sector jobs to reduce reliance on expatriates (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow-up Unit n.d.). In line with

the Omani approach to change, which has always been quite gradualist, Oman takes an incremental approach compared to its neighbours, emphasising the importance of harmony between modernisation and preserving its cultural identity.

From this brief overview it becomes clear that the Gulf visions collectively reflect a broader trend towards modernisation, with all including the key themes of

- economic diversification: shifting from oil dependence to knowledge and innovation-driven economies;
- youth engagement: focusing on education, entrepreneurship and leadership development; and
- cultural modernisation: promoting the arts, entertainment and a more relaxed cultural environment while preserving heritage.

Other crucial goals that can often be found in these projects relate to women's rights and gender issues, as we will scrutinise shortly. While these visions have catalysed unprecedented social changes, challenges persist, including societal debates about balancing modernisation with tradition, addressing inequalities and managing the pace of change in conservative communities.

Migration, human rights and cultural anxieties

Gulf societies are grappling with an overwhelming influx of expatriates and the pervasive draw of Western influence. This dynamic has fostered cultural anxieties and efforts to establish a purer Gulf Arab identity, deeply rooted in a tribal past, due to a *makhāwif al-dhawbān al-thaqāfi*—‘fear of cultural dissolution’.

As Miriam Cooke observes, however, adherence to tribal identity in the Gulf today is not simply a matter of being resistant to change, but can also be about promoting transformation and social change. She argues that tribal identity as manifested in the Arab Gulf today is a principal element in the Gulf's perceived sense of modernity (Cooke 2014, 11).

Unlike the mid-twentieth century, when tribalism was seen as an obstacle to modernisation, today it represents an opportunity for racial privilege, social status and exclusive entitlement to national wealth. This is particularly true for the new *khaleeji* middle class, which has benefited from enormous investments by the ruling families in its education and well-being. These investments have fostered a deep strategic loyalty to the emirs, surpassing even that of the traditional merchant constituencies (Abdulla 2024, 41).

The *khaleeji* middle class is mostly made up of university graduates who are multilingual and self-reflexive citizens. They essentially embrace modernity and globality, but also feel comfortable with lingering traditional values and institutions. They are typically reformists, but prefer incremental institutional changes, thus embodying the forces of

evolution and continuity at the same time. Cooke's concept of a tribal modern brand highlights a space where the hypermodern, tribal and national coalesce, a space which the ruling elites are comfortably occupying.

The evolution of Gulf ways of experiencing tribalism goes hand in hand with the new ways in which interethnic relations and demographic imbalances are experienced between citizens and migrants. For centuries, the Gulf has had a transnational population, and local cultures are so intermingled with those of their Indian Ocean neighbours that it is difficult to pinpoint whether some Gulf families are Persianised Arabs or Arabised Persians. However, researchers have documented how the ethnic diversity of the Gulf has always been officially sidelined in favour of a narrative centred around Bedouin heritage (Al Mutawa 2018).

Gulf states have been trying to balance the preservation of a pure cultural identity with their strong aspiration to project an image of tolerance and inclusivity. In the UAE, for example, recent legal reforms have included allowing expatriates to follow their home country's laws on divorce and inheritance instead of Islamic law. Additionally, new laws permit non-Muslims to consume alcohol without requiring a licence. While these measures have been praised as progressive, critics view them as superficial attempts to attract tourists and bolster the country's international reputation.

The scholar Khalil al Anani offers a critical perspective of the UAE's approach, suggesting that it uses religion manipulatively to justify political actions and delegitimise adversaries. He argues that the UAE has adopted a depoliticised version of Islam that is focused on spirituality and rituals, while sidelining its political dimensions to further suppress potential opposition (Al Anani 2020).

When it comes to human rights in the Gulf, a pivotal element of the debate is the *kafala* system, the sponsorship model used in Gulf Cooperation Council states, which has long been criticised for fostering labour rights abuses. Over the past decade, organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Migrant-Rights.org have documented how this system traps workers in employment situations where their rights to fair wages, freedom of movement and adequate housing are jeopardised.

Significant reforms to the *kafala* system were introduced in Qatar in September 2020. Human Rights Watch acknowledged these changes positively, but emphasised that their success depends on enforcement and monitoring. Key reforms include allowing migrant workers to change jobs without their employer's permission and establishing a higher minimum wage for all workers, regardless of nationality. With these changes Qatar became the first Gulf state to let workers change jobs before their contracts have ended without their employer's consent and the second to implement a minimum wage, following Kuwait.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Qatar still imposes harsh penalties for 'absconding', which include fines, detention, deportation and re-entry bans, and

Qatar's treatment of its two-million-strong migrant workforce, especially under the spotlight of the 2022 World Cup, continues to draw widespread international criticism.

The intersection of migration, human rights and cultural anxieties in the Gulf reveals a complex tension between preserving national identity and embracing global modernity, highlighting an ongoing struggle to balance cultural authenticity, social equity and international accountability. Another domain where the interplay of these forces becomes particularly intricate is that of gender roles.

Navigating the complexity of evolving gender roles

In the Gulf, gender roles are evolving as the region negotiates finding a balance between tradition and modernity. Rapid development, cultural anxieties and global influences are shaping both top-down and bottom-up efforts to address gender issues, defined as challenges arising from gender-based differences on both personal and societal levels.

Women constitute a significant portion of the Middle Eastern youth population, and their increased participation in the workforce could drive substantial economic growth. Research also links greater gender equality to enhanced social stability and a reduced likelihood of extremism. Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, female enrolment in higher education continues to rise, with women often outnumbering men (Assaad et al. 2020, 817). These educational advancements are transforming gender relations across countries and enabling women to form networks beyond traditional family and tribal ties.

Shifting sands: recent advances in women's rights and opportunities

Undeniably, *khaleeji* women in the Gulf have made notable strides, achieving greater representation in education, the workforce, and even political and entrepreneurial spaces.

Forbes Middle East's '200 Most Powerful Arab Women'⁷ and '100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen'⁸ lists prominently feature women from Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

When it comes to women's rights, the UAE has been right at the forefront of recent improvements. Reforms in the country since 2020 have included introducing stricter penalties for sexual harassment, rape and honour crimes—perpetrators of honour killings now face the same penalties as murderers, including life imprisonment or the death penalty. The UAE has also appointed 9 women to its 21-member cabinet, more than any other Arab country, positioning it as a regional leader in women's empowerment and gender parity.

Saudi Arabia, through its Vision 2030 strategy, has catalysed significant changes, including granting women the right to drive—implemented in 2018—and the ability to travel and obtain passports without the approval of a male guardian. Additionally, the

requirement for women to wear the black abaya has been relaxed, and women over 21 have gained the right to start businesses independently, without needing a guardian's approval. The government has also implemented equal procedures for men and women for registering businesses and obtaining trademarks. Between 2018 and 2020, the labour force participation rate of Saudi women, that is to say those working or looking for work, rose from 19.7% to 33% (Bouissou 2023). More broadly, female participation in the labour force surged from 23.2% in 2016 to 34.4% by 2022 (Polok and Akeel 2024).

According to S&P Global Ratings, if this growth in labour force participation continues at the current pace over the next decade, Saudi Arabia's economy could potentially be \$39 billion, or 3.5%, larger than it would be in a scenario aligned with its historical growth in the participation rate (Al Helou 2023).

Qatar, through its National Vision 2030, is attempting to emphasise—albeit in a traditional cultural framework—women's empowerment in education, with women constituting 70% of university graduates and benefiting from flexible public-sector work arrangements to balance professional and family commitments.

In spite of these advances, however, challenges to gender equality persist, and often, when it comes to the Gulf, the long-lasting disparities between men and women tend to be overlooked in favour of narratives related to progress and happiness.

Barriers that remain: challenges to gender equality in the Gulf Cooperation Council

One hundred and fifteen years. This is the time it would take the MENA region to reach gender parity according to the World Economic Forum's 2022 estimates. The region remains the furthest from achieving gender parity globally, with a 62.6% parity score (World Economic Forum 2024). Within the MENA region, the UAE, Israel and Bahrain have achieved the highest parity, while Oman and Morocco rank among the lowest.

Unequal access to education and employment opportunities remains a significant challenge: while more women are entering universities, cultural norms and societal expectations often limit their career choices. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women account for 51.8% of university students, but only 33% of the labour force (Elhadary and Abdelatti 2024). Women also remain vastly underrepresented in leadership roles across politics and business; in 2022, women held only 16.8% of legislative seats in the MENA region, up from 4% in 2000.

Other challenges include restrictive personal status and citizenship laws, which often prevent women from passing citizenship on to their children or foreign spouses. These laws, stemming from patriarchal visions of identity and national belonging, create significant barriers to women's autonomy and intermarriage.

While significant progress has been made, the Gulf faces a long road towards achieving gender parity, and addressing systemic barriers will be key to unlocking the full potential of its economies and societies.

Prospects

This article has explored the multifaceted dynamics of social change in the Gulf region. Rather than providing an exhaustive—and impossible—analysis of all the social changes and shifts occurring in the Arab Gulf monarchies, it aimed to highlight the ongoing foment in the region and examine the complex relationship between top-down and bottom-up forces, with a special focus on gender equality.

The Gulf monarchies have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, crafting ambitious national visions that illustrate the transformative potential of state-led reforms in reshaping societal norms. At the same time, grass-roots movements and trends have played a critical role in challenging traditional power structures and advocating for inclusion.

Gender equality has emerged as a key lens through which to understand the broader currents of social transformation. While notable progress has been achieved—including increased female participation in education and the workforce, as well as legal reforms addressing women's rights—the region still faces significant challenges.

Ultimately, the Gulf's social landscape remains one of dynamic evolution, driven by the interplay of visionary leadership and grass-roots agency.

Notes

1. In the context of studying a culture or region, essentialism assumes that people within that culture share fixed traits, behaviours or values that are independent of historical or social change. An essentialising perspective is one that simplifies a culture or region by reducing its complexity to a set of presumed core attributes and neglects internal diversity, historical shifts and the influence of external factors.
2. Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have always debated the notion of social change, its causes and stages. For an overview of the major theories on social change, see, for instance, Del-Shamarran (2022).
3. This is especially true in the case of the United Arab Emirates.
4. Readers can gain an overview of this by visiting <https://khaleejjesque.me>, a website that offers creative and cultural updates on trends, artists, entrepreneurs, exhibitions and a wide range of cultural practices in the Gulf countries.
5. According to data from Vision 2030, homeownership among Saudi citizens rose from 47% in 2016 to over 60% in 2023. See Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2025).
6. According to the same set of data, healthcare coverage in Saudi Arabia increased from 78% in 2016 to 96.41% in 2023. See Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2025).
7. Criteria: (1) the individual's role in influencing revenues and budget; (2) the degree of power associated with their position; (3) the economic indicators of the country—which uses the World Bank's Knowledge Assessment Methodology Index, GDP and GDP per capita; and (4) length of time in their position. See *Forbes Middle East* (n.d.b).
8. See *Forbes Middle East* (n.d.a).

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