

## PREFACE

The mass protests against authoritarian rule that swept the Arab world in 2011 have changed the Middle East, and perhaps the world, forever. They contributed to the biggest global turmoil since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a wave of demonstrations, economic crises, and austerity measures with wide-ranging implications for the future. 2011 was the “year of dreaming dangerously,” a year in which various counter-hegemonic ideologies briefly challenged the capitalist world-system.<sup>1</sup> These protests included the Occupy movement, which took some inspiration from the Arab uprisings, as well as mass protests and strikes all over the globe.<sup>2</sup> It seems as if Arabs, and indeed young people across the world, had been waiting for something to rally around, something that could galvanize protests. The Arab uprisings have reaffirmed the importance of people power, the sense that taking to the streets and demanding change can really make a difference, and that the powerful are so only as long as people believe they are untouchable. For decades, public discourse in the Middle East had been cleansed of actual politics, deals were made in secret, crony ministers or royals—and there are many—could not be criticized. The Arab uprisings changed all that, and a new Arab public sphere emerged in which Arab autocrats could no longer feel safe. But

counter-revolutionary forces quickly swept through Middle Eastern streets, trying to divide the protesters along regional, sectarian, tribal, or ideological lines.

The largest protest movements developed in the Arab republics Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, where dictators were ousted, while the Syrian uprising became more and more a civil war. In contrast, as of 2013, no ruler in an Arab monarchy had to step down because of the pressure exerted by his own people, even though a youth movement arose in Morocco and protests in Jordan grew in 2012. In general, then, the monarchies that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council, the GCC—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—are more often than not presented as stable, largely unchallenged by the Arab Spring protests.<sup>3</sup> The truth is, however, that all the GCC countries have been affected by the Arab Spring and—with the exception of Qatar and the UAE—saw protest movements emerge. The regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen may have been key anchors of American hegemony in the region, in the “fight against terror,” and in ensuring Israel’s security. But protests in the Gulf states were even more threatening to American hegemony than the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt because the states bordering the Gulf<sup>4</sup> contain about two-thirds of the world’s proven oil reserves and a third of the proven natural gas reserves. They are also home to major U.S. army bases, key buyers of Western arms and increasingly important trading partners with significant investments in Western economies.<sup>5</sup>

Bahrain almost experienced a revolution in early 2011. And even those countries that did not see protest movements emerge were transformed by security responses in anticipation of protest movements, such as in the UAE. But Western political elites, and both the Western and pan-Arab media, are for strategic reasons often reluctant to discuss the protests and demands for political reform in the Gulf. As David Cameron paradigmatically defined the position of Western policymakers in April 2012, “Bahrain is not Syria.”<sup>6</sup>

This book tells the story of how the Arab Spring affected these Gulf countries, above all Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman, and how Gulf regimes responded both at home and in the wider Middle East to calls for political change. It is not a comprehensive history of the Arab Spring, or of everything that has happened in the Gulf states since the start of the Arab Spring. Rather, it uses some of the examples of popular protest in the Gulf to show that the legitimacy of Gulf rulers has been challenged profoundly.

Reacting to these historical challenges and demands for democracy, a fairer distribution of resources, and the rule of law, Gulf ruling families and the regimes around them resorted to old tactics of denial, repression, economic largesse, and defamation. None of the Gulf states initiated significant domestic political reforms or managed to engage the emerging youth movements in a manner that would pave the way for a stable future. While the Gulf regimes often embraced the new politics and discourse of the Arab Spring abroad, they refused to acknowledge that this new era in Arab history also had a profound impact at home.

In response to the Arab Spring protests, the Gulf ruling families, above all the Bahraini and Saudi ruling families, have played on and strengthened sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia to prevent a cross-sectarian opposition front, something that seemed possible in the first days of the uprising in Bahrain, thereby creating a *sectarian Gulf*. But while sectarianism in the Gulf owes much to regime-sponsored or approved sectarian rhetoric, and a political campaign indiscriminately targeting the Gulf Shia, other factors are at play as well.

The sectarian Gulf was encouraged by sectarian identity entrepreneurs,<sup>7</sup> namely people who used sectarian identity politics to bolster their own positions. A close look at their role indicates that sectarianism was not just a government invention but the result of an amalgam of political, religious, social, and economic elites who all used sectarianism to further their personal aims.

Because the media are controlled, the sectarianism in Gulf media since 2011 can only be attributed to decisions of political

elites. But once sectarianism has become a viable way of tarnishing the image of political adversaries, it moves to all levels of society and becomes as much a bottom-up as a top-down process.

My interest in the new sectarianism sweeping through the Middle East stems from my studies and travels in that region. After 9/11, key debates focused on “Islam” as a “threat” to the West, the so-called Clash of Civilizations, and whether Islam was a refutation of secularization theories and the idea that Western-style liberal democracy and capitalism would prevail unchallenged—amounting, all in all, to an “end of history” as we knew it.<sup>8</sup> Discussions of Sunni-Shia conflicts were in many cases still confined to academia, or to individual countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, or Pakistan. At the time, I was not particularly interested in the differences between Sunni and Shia, but more in the problematic image of the Middle East and Islam in the West, and in the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that were being waged in response to 9/11. While the 9/11 attacks were carried out by an organization that was virulently anti-Shia—al-Qaeda—they were mainly directed against the West. It was only the civil war between Shia and Sunni in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein that really made sectarianism one of *the* key features of Middle East politics.<sup>9</sup> And the response of the Gulf states to the Arab Spring has reinforced this situation, arguably making sectarianism in the region more important than ever before.

In February 2006 I was studying at the University of Isfahan in Iran for a few weeks to improve my Persian and to get to know this important yet often misunderstood country. Much of the splendor of Isfahan’s palaces and gardens stem from the sixteenth century, when Isfahan became the capital of the Safavid dynasty. Sunni and Shia split very early in the formation of Islam over the leadership of the community of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad. The Shia do not recognize the first three caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, as successors of the Prophet Muhammad but rather see

Ali, whom the Sunnis see as the fourth caliph, as the righteous successor after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Under Ali's reign, the party of Ali, Shiat Ali, split away from the majority of Muslims, who would become known as the Sunnis. Throughout Islamic history, the Shia remained the minority amongst Muslims and often lived at the periphery of empires and in opposition to the powers of the day. But they developed a distinct school of jurisprudence, a powerful clergy, and their own religious rituals and festivities.<sup>10</sup> It was the Safavids that converted much of the Iranian population to Shia Islam and made Shiism the state religion in Iran. They did this in part by staffing the new religious bureaucracy with Shia clerics from the old centers of Shia scholarship in Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain, where Shiism had survived over the centuries.<sup>11</sup>

During my studies in Iran, I had the feeling that the self-understanding of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its political problems stemmed from a number of factors: negotiating religion and politics, resisting the secular legacy of the Shah and replacing it with solidarity with the Global South and a nationalism inspired by Islam, a disdain for Israel and America, and tensions between the people and a repressive regime. All of this was in 2009 to erupt into open conflict when the Green Movement attempted to change the system through large street protests.<sup>12</sup> But it did not really occur to me that the state legitimized itself *vis-à-vis* the Sunnis. Iran has its own sizable minorities of Kurds, Azeris, and Baluchs, as well as Shia and Sunni Arabs near the Gulf coast. These communities face discrimination of their own.<sup>13</sup> The largely Sunni Arabs in the southern Khuzestan province were also inspired by the Arab Spring and protested in April 2011 to commemorate the memory of an earlier uprising there in 2005. They were repressed harshly.<sup>14</sup> Sunnis from the Gulf often ask why the Gulf states should treat their Shia citizens better while Iran suppresses its Sunnis.<sup>15</sup> Shia Islam is key to how state and society function in Iran. But again, I did not get a sense that the main

“others” were the Sunnis per se. A disdain for and ritualized bashing of America and Israel seemed much more important.

However, one morning in late February 2006, as I left the guesthouse for foreign students and walked over to the language center, things had changed visibly. The day before, Sunni militants affiliated with al-Qaeda had entered the al-Askari shrine in the Iraqi city of Samarra and set off explosives, causing the massive golden dome above the shrine to collapse.<sup>16</sup> The shrine is one of Shia Islam’s holiest sites, as it is the burial place for the tenth and eleventh imams that are revered by Twelver Shia Muslims. Twelver Shia are the mainstream of Shia Islam and honor twelve imams as successors of the Prophet Muhammad and leaders of the Muslim community after the Prophet’s death.

The attacks caused outrage across the Muslim world, but particularly amongst Shia Muslims, and led to a renewed campaign of sectarian violence in Iraq, including reprisal attacks by Shia on Sunnis.<sup>17</sup> The day after the attack, I saw along my route to Persian lessons that pictures showing the crumbled dome of the shrine, which every Shia Muslim knows, had been put up across Isfahan University and indeed the town itself. Iranian media were outraged, and people were shocked by this deliberate attack on a holy site. In the weeks that followed, I had many discussions in which Iranians started to denounce al-Qaeda and its alleged Sunni backers in the Gulf.

Over the following years, I traveled to the other side of the Gulf, to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait, societies characterized by centuries of trade, travel, and migration that were heterogeneous and escaped easy categorizations. And yet, in the discourse of their politicians and in the media, Saudi Arabia and Iran had become reduced to “Sunni” and “Shia” countries that were vying for influence amongst their respective sects in the wider region. Although Saudi Arabia and Iran use religion to further their aims, the reality is more nuanced.

What distinguishes the new sectarianism from previous periods of sectarian tensions is that rulers now make decisions on the basis

of a sectarian assessment of politics. They think strategically in sectarian terms, and shape their foreign policies in those terms. As a result, majority Shia Iran is viewed as an infidel arch-rival, although paradoxically followed closely by the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which since its election victories in Egypt and Tunisia has become the other enemy of choice for Gulf elites, who attribute much of the same malicious transnational meddling to the Muslim Brotherhood that they also ascribe to Iran. That the discourse surrounding the alleged meddling of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood is so similar, even though the interests and allies of the two players are so radically different, nurtures the suspicion that these allegations are often about finding a scapegoat to deflect popular attention to an external enemy.<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence of the new sectarianism, sectarian violence is increasing across the region, and the social fabric between Sunni and Shia has broken down in many Middle Eastern states. While the West has not directly taken up the sectarian rhetoric, it has accepted the sectarian logic of marginalizing the Shia and by default Iran. This is part of a larger scheme to isolate Iran, including by fighting a proxy conflict in Syria, and the United States and the EU therefore do not heavily pressure their allies in the Gulf to tame sectarianism.

Of course, sectarianism has for centuries been a driving force of civil war and violence in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent. In many ways a reference to sectarianism is often meant to imply that the conflicts between religions and within religions are based on ancient hatred, on an irrationality that escapes analysis, and that the study of sectarian conflicts is futile, since such conflicts are based on cultural essentials.

But the kind of political sectarianism this book talks about only arises under certain conditions, particularly when it is coupled with political economy, with the notion of who gets what, when, where, and from whom. Political sectarianism in the Levante, for example, was strengthened under Ottoman and French colonial rule because of the institutionalization of sects in the political and

judicial systems and through the disenfranchisement of some sects and the domination by others.<sup>19</sup> Lebanon has for decades served as a reminder that political sectarianism and civil war are fueled by the involvement of external actors, including former European colonial powers, the United States, Israel, Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup>

In the Gulf, the British institutionalized and ensured the survival of pro-British Sunni monarchies that became dependencies of the British Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These Gulf monarchies were always dependent on external support to defend themselves against larger neighbors and against internal uprisings. When Britain withdrew its armed forces from the Gulf in 1971 and Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman became independent from Britain, the Americans took over as the Gulf's security guarantor. Henceforth, the three regional powers, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, competed even more openly for power.<sup>21</sup>

A history of proxy conflicts with Iran after 1979 and a deep fear of Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the Gulf lead to a paranoia in the mind-sets of Gulf rulers when it comes to Iran.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Gulf rulers harbor an equally strong suspicion of street politics à la Tahrir square that give people agency and voice, and that is fundamentally at odds with the absolutist monarchical systems they are part of. This explains why Gulf rulers were so afraid when a mass protest movement with the strong participation of Gulf Shia combined their fears of the Shia and Iran with a disdain for street politics, and why they reacted to the Arab Spring with repression and sectarianism that divided their societies into Sunni and Shia "camps," literally creating a sectarian Gulf.