

Citizenship in the Gulf

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The Arab uprisings that started in 2011 have intensified debates over the meaning of citizenship, the rights and responsibilities that go with citizenship, and relations between citizens and states. These debates exist in the Gulf too, although perhaps less loudly than in the countries undergoing transition.

On the one hand, numerous Arab commentators, including some Gulf intellectuals, have sought to encapsulate the key demand of the Arab uprisings as ‘a transition from being subjects to being citizens’. This captures a sense of a desired end to perceived passivity and a claim to becoming a different sort of political being, respected and with rights and dignity. On the other hand, Gulf governments have continued to define different *de facto* tiers of citizenship – determining who is entitled to which levels of economic benefits on the basis of ancestry, who is entitled to vote, whether women can pass citizenship on to their children, and in some cases, even stripping citizenship from dissidents perceived as being disloyal.

In both cases, the tangible legal construction of citizenship, which Gulf constitutions typically state should be equal for all citizens but which

in practice comes with different degrees of privilege or exclusion, intersects with more subjective and contested identity politics, in terms of a variety of attempts to define the national identity of both citizens and their states. The latter efforts are taking place both from the top down, as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments invest in cultural and social national identity projects, including formal citizenship education in schools in some countries, and at a more grassroots level, within civil society, political activism and the arts, sometimes challenging official discourses that often seek to identify loyalty to the state with loyalty to the rulers.

Nationals and national identity

This begs the question, citizens of where and what? GCC governments are focusing primarily on their own citizens and states, but to some extent are also constructing a notion of GCC citizenship, as GCC nationals are increasingly being extended entitlements that were previously limited to country nationals, such as the right to own land, majority stakes in companies in sectors protected for national investors, and so on. The gradual (and uneven) process of GCC integration raises a number of questions about future relations between GCC citizens and GCC states; the idea of a Gulf union attracts support from unlikely bedfellows with very different ideas of what it should mean, from senior royals to leftist Arab nationalists. The current borders of GCC countries have been defined relatively recently, with most states becoming independent upon Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, except for Kuwait (1962) and Saudi Arabia (1932), and a series of border disputes were resolved even more recently. Moreover, the memory of Iraq's invasion and the occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91, the widespread fear of Iranian efforts to assert hegemony outside its own borders, and the natural tendency of small states to be concerned about possible threats from larger and sometimes aggressive neighbours, all lead to some insecurity about the solidity of the nation-state. Finally,

world-record rates of inward migration, which have led Arabic to become a *de facto* second language in some Gulf countries, have also led to questions over national identity.

That said, views that the Gulf countries lack any national identity and merely constitute ‘tribes with flags’, in contrast to Western nation-state norms, are overstated. Many of Europe’s borders are also recent, artificial constructions, and thus defining national identity proves elusive even for many long-established countries, based as it often is on a series of myths about what distinguishes people from their neighbours.⁴² The modern Western/Westphalian nation-state is a fairly-recent invention, but there are longer histories of places, peoples and rulers that feed into the construction of the identities of modern states, whether this be Oman’s long history as an imperial power, or Saudi Arabia’s history as the birthplace of Islam, referenced in the preferred description of the king in the local media as ‘the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’. Moreover, in countries where the majority of the population is under 30, it may be less relevant that the country is just over 40 years old.

The legal, political and economic construction of citizenship by Gulf regimes has been designed partly to provide incentives for Gulf nationals to support the existing nations rather than being swayed by stronger pulls towards transnational Arab or Islamic identities. In terms of the political rights of Gulf nationals, for instance, Jill Crystal⁴³ argues that the creation of the Kuwaiti parliament in 1962 was designed partly to contain impulses towards Arab nationalism, especially given fears that Iraq might exploit such sentiments for the sake of its own territorial expansion. Arab nationalism was weakened by a number of factors in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the growing economic inequality among Arab states after the 1973 oil boom as well as the failure of two Arab unity experiments and the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. The oil boom, and the policies adopted by governments to distribute some of the benefits of oil wealth among the population, added to the economic incentives for Gulf nationals to support their existing nation-

states, which happened to legitimise the concentration of the region's wealth among a small proportion of its population.

The economic benefits of holding Gulf nationality, discussed further below, are an important facet of the construction of citizenship in the region, and it is often suggested that there is a trade-off between economic benefits and political rights. At the same time, when the legitimacy of Kuwait and Bahrain as nation-states has been profoundly challenged by rival regional powers, citizens' political rights and aspirations have been an important part of states' claims to legitimacy, in an international legal and political system that is supposed to value the rights of peoples to self-determination as well as state sovereignty. Notably, the independence of Bahrain came after a 1970 United Nations plebiscite in which the majority of Bahrainis surveyed sought an independent Bahrain rather than integration with Iran. In 1991, after Kuwait was invaded and occupied by Iraq – which exploited a pan-Arabist discourse in an attempt to de-legitimise the Kuwaiti nation-state – the ruling family came to an agreement with opposition forces to unite behind the liberation of their country and restore its suspended parliament. These recent consultations embody elements of the notion of a social contract between rulers and citizens.

Citizenship and the state

The legal notion of citizenship is part of an internationally-recognised system of sovereign states, and as such it is easy to assume it means the same thing everywhere. But the legal definitions of citizenship vary and evolve between countries and over time – including the question of how it is acquired, and the rights and responsibilities it entails. There are also very different systems governing who is entitled to define citizenship, and the degree to which the executive can endow or revoke citizenship, versus the idea of citizenship as a birthright, or as part of signing up to some basic common values.

Historically, the notion of citizenship in the Gulf has been heavily influenced by British ideas, as passports and modern borders were largely introduced during the British imperial period. Prior to that, borders were more fluid, and merchants, traders and tribes in the Gulf's port cities enjoyed a mobility that gave them some leverage over their rulers (not unlike today's multinationals, they could easily relocate to another area, taking their business with them, if dissatisfied). The diaries of Charles Belgrave,⁴⁴ former British political resident in Bahrain, describe his efforts in the late 1920s to introduce a system to inspect passports and passes held by Persian traders coming to Bahrain in the hope of reducing the number of Persians entering the port at a time of tension between the British and Persian Empires (which still laid claim to Bahrain). Concerns about Persian influence also fed into the decision in Bahrain's 1937 Nationality and Property Law to link citizenship with the ownership of property; the ability of non-nationals to buy land was restricted, while a number of wealthy Persian merchants became Bahraini nationals in order to retain control of their properties.⁴⁵

Since independence, and the oil price spike that followed, citizenship has evolved in ways that are distinct to the Gulf, partly because of a very different economic model. Gulf nationals typically receive economic benefits seen as their share of the country's wealth – including subsidies, free public services, education stipends, and, in some cases, land grants and government jobs – and do not pay income tax (though other taxes and fees do exist, especially in less wealthy Bahrain and Oman). This is obviously a contrast with Europe, where the history of the development of citizenship, including the right to vote, has been associated with taxation and military service as well as property ownership.

Citizenship is difficult to obtain in most GCC States. This has an economic rationale given the benefits attached, and the desire not to dilute these benefits greatly by naturalising the foreign workers that make up the majority of the region's population. It also reflects the

social significance that can be placed on family descent and lineage, which affect the status of different ‘tiers’ of citizens as well as helping to determine who is a citizen. Whereas in Europe there are very different views about the degree to which ethnic descent, culture and language should be relevant to citizenship, compared with the commitment to living and working in a country, in the GCC it is typically necessary to have grandparents who were citizens. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), different levels of benefits are extended to families who possess a ‘family book’, *kbulasat al-qaid*, showing their Emirati descent, compared with those that have been naturalised.⁴⁶

Most Gulf States have stateless residents, known as *bidoon jinsiyya* (without nationality), many of whom are descended from parents who did not obtain passports when these were introduced in the last century, whether because they did not understand their importance (especially common among illiterate people) or because of deliberate discrimination. The problem is particularly acute in Kuwait, which has an estimated 80,000-120,000 *bidoon* residents, largely excluded from state services or even the ability to register a marriage; the authorities contend many are illegal immigrants from Saudi Arabia or Iraq posing as *bidoon*, while *bidoon* activists say most are original residents of Kuwait.

In Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar, the power of the executive to revoke citizenship has been used as part of strategies for managing post-Arab uprising pressure, while in some Western countries, including the UK, the executive has assumed controversial new authorities to revoke citizenship from dual nationals in the context of the ‘war on terror’. The power to grant citizenship has also been used by rulers, for instance in the UAE and Bahrain, to help to resolve the status of children born to mothers who are nationals but fathers who are not. In most GCC countries, citizenship is passed through the father, meaning women who marry foreigners are penalised by seeing their children unable to benefit from the free schools, healthcare, and, later, job opportunities reserved for nationals. The UAE has begun

to change this legislation – passing a decree in 2011 that children in this situation could apply for citizenship once they become 18 – which is helping to make the legal notion of citizenship somewhat less gendered. In the meantime, rulers have also granted nationality to some of the children facing this issue.

In Bahrain, too, the king has given citizenship to hundreds of children in the same situation, something long advocated by the Supreme Council for Women, a quango (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation) headed by his wife, Sheikha Sabeeka. He has also given nationality to hundreds of former *bidoon* people. In both cases, the ruler has directly addressed issues that have caused human rights concerns, albeit through one-off decrees rather than institutional change. However, in the case of Bahrain, this has been overshadowed by the more extensive use of the royal prerogative to naturalise tens of thousands of new citizens over the past decade. In this case, it is generally believed that most have come from Sunni countries, helping to explain why the estimated proportion of Shia Muslims in the population has fallen in recent years.⁴⁷ A similar policy was pursued in Kuwait in the 1960s and 1970s, granting citizenship to mostly Sunni tribes from other parts of the Arabian peninsula, who were seen at the time as a counter-weight to the urbanised Kuwaiti liberals, leftists and Arab nationalists. Ironically, their children are among the leaders of today's opposition – indicating the risk that the short-term adoption of such bio-politics strategies can have unintended consequences in the longer term. Bahraini sociologist Abdulhadi Khalaf has argued that the powers of the ruler to make 'grants of citizenship' is one of the contentious features of a political system that faces a struggle between an ethnic politics, which he defines as communal politics based on kinship, tribalism or religious affiliations, and a nationalist politics that opposes tribalism and colonialism and has traditionally been more leftist, though the leftist movements have faced their own questions about whether to focus on Bahraini or Arab nationalism.⁴⁸ Khalaf writes:

Following a seven decades old tradition, grants of citizenship became a tested instrument for balancing population mix... Being a gratuity, this type of citizenship and the rights it infers may also be revoked, partially or totally... Even after receiving a citizenship as gratuity, 'naturalised citizens' must be on their guard and are constantly required to be on the good books of the regime, its ruling core and its security services.⁴⁹

In 2012 Khalaf himself was one of 31 Bahrainis stripped of their citizenship for unspecified security reasons. In the same year, seven UAE nationals were also stripped of their citizenship, again for security reasons that were not detailed; several had links to the Islah Association, an Islamist group, and some had signed a 2011 petition calling for an elected parliament. In both cases, several people were left stateless, creating a more international dimension to the problem. In an unusual twist, at least one of the UAE activists was given a Comoros Islands passport by the government, despite having no historical or family connections to the Comoros, and was then deported to Thailand on a tourist visa. The UAE has also reportedly given Comoros passports to *bidoon* residents.⁵⁰

Citizenship and youth mobilisation

The use of executive powers to de-nationalise dissidents has been occurring in the Gulf at precisely the same time that youth movements around the region have been calling for a new relationship between states and their people, seeking greater rights and dignity. There is a tendency among Gulf officials to view the Arab uprisings as primarily being motivated by economic dissatisfaction, yet both the slogans used at protests and the longer-term campaigns organised by social and political movements across the Arab world have articulated a complex combination of political and economic demands.

The use of national symbols has also been a key feature of the protests, including in Bahrain, where the national flag became such a feature of protest rallies that police have been filmed confiscating them from would-be demonstrators, while the information minister accused Shia protestors of using a doctored flag where the usual five white triangles had supposedly been increased to 12, which, it was claimed, indicated their allegiance to the 12 Shia imams rather than to the nation-state. While this 12-point flag does not seem to have actually existed, the competing stories about flags highlight the propaganda battle over national symbols at a time of political contestation, where the protestors claimed to be the representatives of 'the people' while state media cast them as 'traitors' serving a 'foreign agenda'. This 'foreign agenda' narrative has also been used heavily in the UAE against 94 dissidents now facing trial there. The theme of safeguarding the authentic identity of the nation against foreign criticism has also been used in official discourse responding to criticisms from international human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or foreign governments, for instance when the Bahraini interior minister told a meeting of GCC ministers in November 2012 that the GCC states were facing a new 'colonial plot' under the guise of 'human rights' and 'democracy'.

Yet at other times, GCC governments have responded to opposition and protest movements by expanding the space for a national political debate. The limited expansion of political space in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, with the return of formerly-exiled Shia dissidents, some of whom later became municipal councillors, and the creation of a half-elected Bahraini parliament in 2001, were also opportunities to give nationals from sometimes marginalised social groups a stake in the system, even if those opportunities did not prove to be the foundation for a more sustained reform project. At a time of increasing ethnic and sectarian tensions, a renewed focus on citizenship and nationhood can be a valuable, more inclusive approach.

There are both political and civil society activists seeking to counter sectarian and ethnic tensions and to develop a more inclusive notion of citizenship – whether this takes the form of campaigning for political reforms and a constitutional monarchy, or more of a ‘social non-movement’ focus on building up social solidarity and trying to develop a longer-term change in attitudes. One of the early calls for protests in Bahrain on 14 February 2011 called on Bahrainis of all religious and ethnic groups to march together, stating sectarianism was constructed by the regime as part of efforts to divide people. Also in Bahrain in 2011, local bloggers gave out badges saying ‘no Sunni, no Shia, just Bahraini’. But the vast majority of protestors were Shia, and for much of the Sunni population, these became ‘Shia protests’, while in Iraq in 2013, protests in the western provinces have been dubbed ‘Sunni protests’, even when they call for basic rights on the basis of citizenship. Meanwhile in Kuwait, protests calling for a boycott of the December 2012 election resonated more among Sunni sympathisers with an opposition whose leaders include Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist former MPs, rather than the Kuwaiti Shia minority. Consequently, the parliament now has its highest-ever representation of Shia, but at the cost of representing fewer voters overall (the election turnout was 40 per cent, a record low for Kuwait). Kuwaiti youth activists have also called on Islamist opposition MPs to take a more inclusive approach to Kuwaiti Shia.

There are still questions about which groups are excluded from the notion of citizenship – the flipside of the often-romanticised Ancient Greek notion of citizenship (for adult Greek males only) being the excluded slave – and only a tiny minority of Gulf human rights activists have taken up the cause of migrant workers or the *bidoon*. On the issue of the *bidoon*, a group of Kuwaiti activists, known as the Group of 29, is campaigning for *bidoon* residents to go through a legal process to determine their nationality, while the Kuwaiti Human Rights Society and the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights have both campaigned on migrants’ rights issues and the latter has set up a Migrant Workers’ Protection Society, the first of its kind in the Gulf.

The continuing political impasse in Bahrain, the failure of Saudi opposition groups to develop a national platform that could unite the Shia protestors of the Eastern province with oppositionists in other areas of the country, and the sectarian double standards evident in the attitude of many politicians to protestors in Bahrain and Kuwait who have made similar demands but who come from different backgrounds, all indicate that social and religious divisions remain a major weakness in opposition bargaining power, and ultimately reduce the ability of citizens to negotiate with the state on the basis of their status as citizens. While some youth activists seek drastic change in the near future, others believe they should focus on longer-term awareness-raising to build up greater solidarity among citizens.⁵¹