

of Stalin (and therefore of Lenin) on the future of Russia (Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance*). If Kovalev could turn these 'sketches' into a more personal memoir and perhaps be a little more undiplomatic in his remarks about ominous characters such as Prikhod'ko (vol. I, pp. 135–6), Shoigu (vol. I, pp. 158–9, vol. II, pp. 47, 120–1), S. Ivanov (vol. I, p. 144), Fradkov (vol. I, pp. 161–2), Adamov (vol. I, pp. 137–41) and others (his attitude to Putin is quite clear enough already), it would be well worth translating the result into English. Those who are interested in contemporary Russia's prospects but don't know Russian should read Peter Reddaway's foreword, which clarifies some of Kovalev's key points.

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## Middle East and North Africa\*

**After the sheikhs: the coming collapse of the Gulf monarchies.** By Christopher M. Davidson. London: Hurst. 2012. 300pp. Index. £29.99. ISBN 978 1 84904 189 8.

This ambitious new book from Christopher Davidson pulls no punches: the author predicts that most of the six Gulf monarchies will be unable to survive in their present form beyond the next two to five years. For this reason, the book is mysteriously unavailable in several Gulf countries, but is all the more hotly debated by Gulf nationals, including some in official circles. There are only a few writers from the Gulf who would dare to make such strong statements in public—which could lead them to fall foul of laws against insulting rulers or advocating changes to the system of government—but the future prospects of monarchy itself are discussed at least in private across the Gulf.

While there are few analysts prepared to go as far as Davidson in setting such a timeline, it is natural that the Arab uprisings, and the collapse of several Arab regimes that were both presumed to be extremely resilient and closely allied to the West, would lead to questions about the durability of the West's strategically important allies in the Gulf. Yet many policy-makers seem to be all but ignoring this question, perhaps because it is so inconvenient. It has become conventional wisdom in many quarters to suggest that, where there was once presumed to be an Arab exception, there is now a monarchical exception.

Apart from Bahrain, little international attention has been paid to the protests that have been taking place in four out of the six Gulf countries (the exceptions being Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). There are still plenty of analysts asking 'whether' the Arab Spring will reach the Gulf. If the Arab Spring is understood in its broad sense—including a new wave of ideas and fresh thinking; challenges to political structures; the articulation of youth demands for greater participation and redistribution of both economic opportunities and political power—rather than being narrowly defined as successful regime change, then it is clear that it is a region-wide phenomenon. It has put Gulf governments on the defensive, and has generated a wide-ranging debate about future political and social development, among both the older generation of established Gulf intellectuals, and a younger generation increasingly addicted to political debate on Twitter. Even in Qatar, the world's wealthiest country in per capita terms, a group of writers has just published a new Arabic book, *The people want reform ... in Qatar, too* (Muntada Al Ma'aref), based on regular political discussion meetings hosted by Ali Al-Kuwari. While most protesters in the Gulf have, like these writers, called for reform, not revolution, there have been calls for a republic in Bahrain and direct criticisms of the rulers by a minority in most of the countries.

\* See also Malise Ruthven, *Encounters with Islam: on religion, politics and modernity*, pp. 515–6; Oz Hassan, *Constructing America's freedom agenda for the Middle East: democracy or domination*, pp. 553–4.

Any book arguing that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies cannot last needs first to answer the question of why previous predictions of their demise—such as Fred Halliday's *Arabia without sultans* (Penguin, 1974)—have not come true. Davidson therefore begins the book by reviewing the existing literature, which shifted from predictions of democratization, particularly common before the 1970s' oil boom, to a more recent focus on the resilience of monarchy. (It would be an interesting exercise to plot the proportion of articles published each year that arguing for and against the durability of the Gulf monarchies against the oil price; periods of low oil prices typically see more expressions of dissent.)

The first half of the book examines the political strategies that different Gulf rulers use to legitimize the monarchy at home and abroad and to strike implicit 'social contracts' or 'ruling bargains' with their populations. Usefully, he draws on both the socio-economic explanations (such as rentier state theory, concentrating on the state's ability to build patronage networks by distributing the windfall income from oil resources, and examinations of the fragmented labour market and lack of either an indigenous working class or an independently wealthy middle class) and the less tangible aspects of legitimizing monarchies through identity politics (top-down nation-building strategies, the teaching of carefully constructed official versions of history in schools and state media, the construction of national identity and the development of 'personality cults' around at least some of the rulers)—the latter helping to explain the huge sums invested in art galleries, football teams, hosting the World Cup and Formula One, and so on. Both aspects of the analysis are needed; for instance, rentier theory alone fails to explain why wealthy Kuwait has seen so many protests. Davidson goes on to examine Gulf governments' efforts to prioritize building influence in the western countries that are their key guarantors of security against external threats; their growing efforts to gain influence with rising eastern powers, a less well-covered area; and their use of aid and peacekeeping in the broader global south.

The second half of the book goes on to argue why Davidson thinks these strategies will no longer prove adequate to ensure the continued survival of the monarchies in their current form. Here, the author identifies a range of underlying problems and pressures. Perhaps the most convincing argument that something has to give is the unsustainability of the current model of growth, which has been predicated on more than a decade of fiscal expansion and on most of the productive labour being carried out by expatriates. The fiscal model is not sustainable in the longer term, especially if the GCC countries continue eating into their most valuable export resource by consuming more and more heavily subsidized energy at home. Yet for this reader, the book does not go far enough in explaining the mechanics of how the problems and contradictions that are identified—including economic inequality, sectarian and ethnic discrimination, tensions with Iran and increasingly close relations with western countries and (unofficially) Israel—would necessarily destabilize the power structures of these countries. Some of these factors could even benefit the powerful (a forthcoming book by Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf* (Stanford University Press), will argue both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain used sectarian divide-and-rule strategies to contain the protests they faced).

Many observers are more optimistic than Davidson about the chances for these countries to find a reformist path, moving beyond the status quo but not entering into revolutions. A significant portion of the population in the Gulf holds, at best, mixed views of the Arab Spring and fears that change could only bring chaos or empower new autocrats. Discussions often revolve around false dichotomies, as if the only options were sticking with the status quo or changing the regime wholesale. Yet there are many possible options for sharing—and circumscribing—political power. There ought to be an option to give people more of

a say in politics in return for economic provisions being gradually scaled back. But much will depend on the mentality and decision-making of ruling families, who face internal divisions over reform.

It is a bad time to be complacent about the survival of monarchies; they will need to adapt if they are to be resilient. Yet western policy-makers often seem certain that collapse will not occur—and seem not to have a plan B. Bruce Riedel from the Brookings Institution recently highlighted the need to analyse how Saudi Arabia might fragment if there was a serious threat to the regime. Unlikely as this may seem today, the number of surprises seen in the Middle East since the Arab uprisings began in—of all places—Tunisia should be a reminder of the need to at least think about the unexpected.

But as Davidson points out in one of the most interesting sections on the Gulf's use of soft power, extensive Gulf government and royal funding for Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at western universities—which provides welcome financial support at a time of budget cuts in the UK and Europe—also provides disincentives for academics loudly to raise these questions if they want to ensure they have reasonable job prospects in the future. Self-censorship about the Gulf exists well beyond the borders of the Gulf states themselves.

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**Syria: the fall of the House of Assad.** By David W. Lesch. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2012. 256pp. Index. £18.99. ISBN 978 0 30018 651 2. Available as e-book.

**Revolt in Syria: eye-witness to the uprising.** By Stephen Starr. London: Hurst. 2012. 232pp. Index. Pb.: £14.99. ISBN 978 1 84904 197 3.

While books on Syria used to be few and far between, the eruption of the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 and the subsequent descent into a bloody civil war has prompted an inevitable flurry of publications. With the conflict still in full flow, these quickly-put-together works may lack some of the academic rigour that will come with more time and reflection, but provide valuable insights to a newly interested public and policy-making community. David Lesch and Stephen Starr offer two such contrasting, yet complementary, perspectives.

Lesch, as a former biographer of Assad who interviewed the President regularly between 2004 and 2010, is uniquely placed to explain the Syrian leader and the violent repression he has overseen. In *Syria: the fall of the House of Assad* Lesch delivers a lucid and engaging narrative of the revolt: its causes, the regime's violent reaction and the international response. Throughout, he deploys his personal experiences of the Syrian President to try to understand how a leader heralded by many (optimistically, perhaps) as a reforming modernizer fell back on the murderous approach of his father and predecessor, Hafez al-Assad, when faced with dissent. Lesch insists that Assad is not the bloodthirsty killer, akin to Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi, presented in aspects of the media and opposition propaganda, but rather a rational actor with a plan. The problem, he posits, is that this rationale is 'the product of an authoritarian system', geared not towards meeting people's demands, but towards maintaining the status quo and regime survival (p. 211). Assad thus believes he can gradually wear down the opposition 'by a thousand cuts', carefully avoiding the kind of large-scale single massacre that might prompt external intervention and, like his father before him, is willing to contemplate years of isolation until a shift in regional climate might permit Syria's international reintegration. A combination of force and patience, rather than any considerations of compromise or negotiated exit, thus dominates Assad's strategy.