
After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies

By Christopher M. Davidson

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Reviewed by Ibrahim Enes Aksu, University of Delaware

In the last ten years, the people of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have lived through transitions, civil turbulences and civil wars, which creates the necessity of dealing with questions such as: what is the future of the Arab uprisings of 2011, and how will they impact the situation of the monarchies in the region? Considering that these uprisings resulted in the overthrow of many longstanding one-man regimes (i.e. Mubarak in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Gaddafi in Libya), one might argue that the Gulf monarchies would eventually succumb to the same fate. Following a similar line of argument, Christopher M. Davidson, in his book *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, argues that “traditional monarchy as a legitimate regime type in the region is soon going to reach the end of its lifespan, especially as most of the Gulf states are now caught in a pincer movement of pressures between unsustainable wealth distribution mechanisms and increasingly powerful ‘super modernizing forces’ that can no longer be controlled or co-opted by political elites” (p. 240). However, considering that it has been more than seven years since the book was first published and the Gulf monarchies still stand, one can hardly find the book’s main argument nor its scenario for the demise of the Sheikhs convincing.

In the first half of the book, Davidson provides the historical details of the development



of the Gulf monarchies and the role that the British empire played in it. He later touches on the big names in modernization theory (i.e. Daniel Lerner, Seymour M. Lipset, and Samuel Huntington) to explain that these monarchies will eventually collapse due to the absence of historical legitimacy and the continuing transformation of their societies. Putting the challenges of having a rentier economy at the center of his argument, Davidson argues that the Gulf monarchies have relied on the huge wealth generated by hydrocarbon reserves and avoided collecting taxes from their citizens, which in turn enables them to maintain their rule of ‘liberalized autocracy,’ wherein the public has little or no chance of demanding representation and accountability. However, for Davidson, because subsidies drawn from the enormous oil and gas revenues will be impossible to sustain in the long run due to the depletion of natural resources, the rentier economies actually contain the seeds of their own destruction.

Davidson mentions that the large population of expatriate workers contributes positively to the lifespan of the monarchs; such workers have no choice but to be loyal to the ruling families due to the huge difference between the wages at home versus those in the Gulf. Furthermore, Davidson emphasizes the *kafala* system that legally obliges most businesses to have a domestic partner/sponsor, which in

turn enables Gulf citizens to sell their status to foreign entrepreneurs.

Another significant point that Davidson touches on is the monarchs' attempt to buy 'soft power'—referring to Joseph Nye's jargon—through enormous wealth funds generated by hydrocarbon reserves; they use such wealth not only to subsidize significant external figures, but to portray themselves as appealing, benign and responsible members of international society. To put it more precisely, the Gulf monarchies want to “buy influence and support in Western and Eastern superpowers, with headline-grabbing sovereign wealth investments, selective development assistance and with the generous sponsorship of projects run by prestigious universities, museums, and other respected cultural and opinion-making centers of excellence” (pp. 229-230). Davidson emphasizes that their extensive financial donations to universities and research centers in the West “have no strings attached per se” but donors usually trust in the receivers' inner instincts to exercise self-censorship, and implicitly encourage them to stay away from studying the Gulf monarchies' domestic politics or societies. Although the section on soft power seemingly weakens the main argument of the book because the Gulf monarchies have found ways to sustain their rule through buying soft power, I believe it actually support the main thesis, especially considering that such extravagant expenses and the squandering of resources will further lead to the quick depletion of oil money, which promptly brings about the end.

Touching on the issue of the limitations of press freedom in the Gulf, through which monarchs basically sustain their control over political and economic narratives, Davidson emphasizes the importance of recently emerging and strengthening opposition waves that

utilize new methods and strategies, especially with the help of technology, including social media, to extend their support base. For example, Kuwait has the highest intensity of smartphone usage in the region; there, Bahraini activists have used Google Earth to expose gigantic royal palaces that are out of the reach of the general public, and anonymous Saudi profiles have used Twitter to feed the public stories of royal corruption. Thus one can hardly ignore the power of technology and social media in the Gulf. However, in the end, it is just a tool whoever uses it. Royal governments can also run campaigns through Twitter and Facebook pages and hire external advisers and lobbyists to confront the challenges arising from social media. Although Davidson cites pretty convincing examples in the region (the fall of Mubarak of Egypt and Gaddafi of Libya, as well as the civil war in Syria after the protests organized through social media), I believe he overly trusts the power of social media to overthrow the Gulf monarchs because his arguments become less reliable when one compares the state repression and human right violations both in those examples and in the Gulf monarchies. Furthermore, Davidson himself argues that “the Gulf monarchies have also been very effective in demonizing opponents, either branding them as foreign-backed fifth columnists, as religious fundamentalists, or even as terrorists,” which in turn enables them to present themselves to the majority of their citizens and the international community “as being safe, reliable upholders of the status quo, and thus far preferable to any dangerous and unpredictable alternatives” (p. 191).

Davidson successfully argues that state control and repression have reached extreme levels and have worn out the legitimacy of the ruling families along with “widening wealth gaps and increasing real unemployment, despite ramped-up public spending pro-

grammes and urgent public sector job creation schemes” (p. 240). However, his conclusion that these factors will be the catalyst for the demise of the Gulf monarchies with the help of social media is not convincing, since he basically disregards the fact that the opposition movements in those countries are not well-organized in nature and their leadership positions are vacant, which in turn leaves no hope that the “coming collapse” will materialize. Although his concluding chapter aptly summarizes the history of the formation of the Gulf monarchies and their internal and external challenges, it fails to convince the reader with respect to its main argument since it does not explain how the coming collapse will happen, what the possible reactions of regional actors will be or how the forma-

tion of the region will be reconfigured after the anticipated collapse. In the 2012 version of this book, Davidson had predicted that “most of these regimes—at least in their present forms—will be gone within the next two to five years” (p. vii). But the picture in 2019 is pretty different. Last but not least, this work is well-written and well-documented, and provides in-depth analytical findings rather than being descriptive in nature. Davidson has undeniable field-work experience, having lived in the Gulf and worked as an assistant professor at Zayed University in the UAE. However, the bibliography is somehow problematic since it overwhelmingly relies on English sources by Western academic/authors, and suffers from the absence of Arabic sources and an insufficient number of Arabic authors.

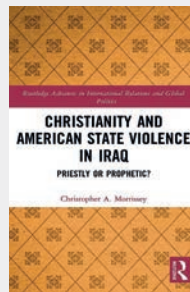
Christianity and American State Violence in Iraq: Priestly or Prophetic?

By Christopher A. Morrissey

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Reviewed by Ömer Taşgetiren, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University

Sociologist Christopher A. Morrissey's book *Christianity and American State Violence in Iraq: Priestly or Prophetic?* attempts to rethink the relationship of religion and violence by taking American Christians' responses to the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a case study. The two terms in the title of the book, 'priestly and prophetic,' come from Max Weber's work and Morrissey uses them to describe two different religious orientations toward the state and toward war. The priestly approach legitimizes and defends the state's power and its war-making capacity, whereas the prophetic approach



challenges it. The overall purpose of the book is to investigate whether Christians in the United States took a priestly or a prophetic approach in the context of the Iraq war, and to explain the variation among Christians regarding their perspectives toward the war.

The book finds that among religious elites, the prophetic approach prevailed and the priestly approach was a minority position. In contrast, in the case of non-elites, the priestly approach was more common. To explain the variation among these attitudes, Morrissey employs