

# Representative Government, Human Rights, and Civil Liberties throughout the Persian Gulf Region

by [Mark Vorpahl](#) (November 2024)



Rooftop Patrol, Operation Steel Curtain, Ubaydi, Iraq (Michael D. Fay)

## Introduction

Recently several news organizations reported New York-based "Human Rights Watch" accepted several million Euros from the government of Qatar which Freedom House, the world-renowned

watchdog for democracy, classifies as “not free,” with a dismal human rights record. In 2023, Human Rights Watch offered a blistering assessment of Qatar’s record regarding civil liberties and human rights over the past four decades, especially towards its large foreign workforce. If true, these allegations demonstrate why wealthy Persian Gulf States continue to struggle with the concept of representative government, human rights, and civil liberties for citizens and foreign workers—combining history, geopolitics, religion, economics, and culture. These factors, compounded by the regional impact of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its expansionist policies and actions throughout the Persian Gulf States, impede efforts to liberalize.

## Defining Representative Government, Human Rights, and Civil Liberties

Three major components that lead to a healthy and sovereign nation-state are Representative Government, Human Rights, and Civil Liberties. For this article, the following definitions will apply: *Representative Government* is defined as holding periodic elections to empower officials to represent the citizens and lead the state—enacting laws and policies that affect politics, socioeconomics, and foreign policy, while answering to the voting populace. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines *Human Rights* as protecting the equality and individual freedom of all human beings without fear, torture, or repression. *Civil Liberties* ensure freedom of speech, religion, fair trial when charged with a crime, freedom of the press, and the right to petition the government and assemble while ensuring minorities (political, racial, ethnic, or religious) are not abused by the majority.

How History Has Shaped the Culture and Politics of the Persian

## Gulf States

Throughout ancient history, Iran, known as Persia, evolved into advanced civilizations: the Achaemenid, Parthians, and Safavids (led by Kings Cyrus and Darius), significantly contributing to human evolution. This history remains an intense source of pride for Iranians in the twenty-first century. During the seventh century, the Islamic Caliphate took hold of the Arabian Peninsula and spread into the current Arab Gulf States: East into Iran and North into Iraq and Syria. As the great Mediterranean States and Empires emerged, trade commenced with Southeast Asia, while the Arabian Peninsula became the land bridge connecting the two continents—leading to the eventual arrival of the European powers. Trade and the austere desert environment allowed powerful Bedouin tribes and Shayks to emerge, eventually leading to the formation of today's Persian Gulf States. As European colonialism expanded, the sixteenth century brought Portugal into the Gulf for the Pearl Trade and the British supported the crown jewel of its growing Empire, India. Britain's influence remained in all eight Gulf States until 1971. Supported by British presence, each state evolved into monarchies of dominant ruling families and, after the completion of World War Two and the acceleration of post-war industry, oil in the region brought great wealth and global strategic attention.

How the Geopolitical Situation Affects the Evolution of Representative Government, Human Rights, and Civil Liberties throughout the Persian Gulf

Cold war tensions increased in the 1979 time period when long-time United States Ally Shah Pahlavi was overthrown during the Iranian Revolution. The long occupation and holding of American hostages followed by the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. These events produced the United States' "Carter

Doctrine" which stated any military attack on the Persian Gulf States would be an attack on the United States. In 1991, the United States led an international coalition driving Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army out of occupied Kuwait with the stated goal of ensuring free flow of oil at market prices for global purchase and consumption. Since the end of World War Two, the United States and European allies focused exclusively on oil and Persian Gulf security as the primary foreign policy objectives. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, military bases throughout the region expanded, ensuring Persian Gulf security and supporting United States military operations. Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates all contain major United States military bases; Oman maintains an agreement allowing the United States to use bases if requested. Over the last decade, the sectarian and ethnic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has accelerated through surrogate wars in Yemen and Syria with China; Russia, and a more sectarian Turkey increasing involvement. In 2023, the geopolitical economics of the Persian Gulf precluded international diplomacy and human rights organizations from exerting pressure for liberalization and reform, downplaying increasing political opposition in Iran with strategic implications.

How Sectarian and Ethnic Rivalry between the Arab Sunni Saudi Arabia and Persian Shia Iran Enhance Dominant Authoritarian Monarchies Impacting Civil Liberties, and Human Rights

Since the death of Mohammed in 632 AD, Islam suffered a long, simmering, and sectarian divide leading to the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD and the division of Islam into rival sects—Sunni and Shia. In 1501, the Safavid Dynasty in Persia established "Twelver Shia Islam" as the state religion. After the 1979 Revolution, Iran became the first Shia Theocracy spreading fear across the Sunni-dominated Arab Gulf States.

Iraq and Saddam Hussein allowed a minority Sunni populace to dominate government and economics at the expense of the Iraqi Shia population (representing sixty percent of the country) until the 2003 United States-led invasion. Kuwait's population is comprised of thirty-five percent Shia and Bahrain, ruled by a Sunni majority, is comprised of sixty-six percent Shia Muslims. Saudi Arabia contains a ten percent Shia population along its Eastern Gulf shoreline where its crucial oil industry is located and where many feel susceptible to meddling by Iran. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman average ten percent Shia population. Since 1979, many Iranians, facing increasing suspicion by Sunni governments, have sought refuge as expatriates in neighboring Gulf Arab states. Iran, the leader of the Shia Islamic World, and Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Sunni Islamic world, continue the sectarian and ethnic surrogate war regionally as representative government, civil liberties, and human rights continue to suffer setbacks. In 2023, Christian Churches were operating in each Persian Gulf State except Saudi Arabia, yet proselytizing is illegal and converting to Christianity from Islam is forbidden. Except for Iraq and Iran, Shia Muslim minorities and majorities (Bahrain) face discrimination and persecution largely based upon the current fears of Iranian meddling and expansionist policies. In Northern Iraq, 2014, the Islamic State persecuted Assyrian Christians and Yazidis in numbers that amounted to genocide.

## How Economics Plays an Important Role

As post-World War Two economies attempted to rebuild and the Cold War accelerated the need for oil, the Persian Gulf became strategic in the geopolitical competition between the United States-led West and the Soviet Union, still relevant for oil in 2023. Iraq and Iran suffered from the ten-year war, internal dissent, coups, revolutions, and genocide, while the other six Arab Gulf states enjoyed immeasurable wealth. Over

the last forty years, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates have been depicted as the wealthiest states internationally by most financial publications. This wealth led to the infusion of a growing foreign workforce filling manual labor, mid-level management, and needed technical skills to address growing societies. Workers from the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Europe, and North America arrived. These foreign populations were needed, but were simultaneously viewed suspiciously as potential security risks by respective Gulf governments. Citizens of all respective Persian Gulf states face challenges regarding civil liberties and human rights, and the foreign workforce from developing countries often live and work in an "indentured servant" stratus with no protection. If the Persian Gulf's oil flow is disrupted, many in the international business and financial fields fear global recession increasing Western and international tolerance for human rights violations.

## How Persian Gulf Foreign Workers are Denied Human Rights and Civil Liberties

Foreign workers in all Gulf Arab states (except Iraq) function in a quasi-caste system, their place dependent on their skill, company, and country of origin. The technically skilled are treated much differently than the manual laborers. While all foreign workers and citizens potentially face human rights and civil liberty abuse, house workers (such as maids from Asia and Africa) face physical, sexual, and psychological abuse without recourse at times, even leading to suicide. They are often forced to work long hours, forbidden contact with the outside (including families), often cheated out of pay, and held hostage to the "Kafala System." Since 1950, the Kafala System controlling foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman has been in place allowing sponsors to confiscate workers' passports upon

arrival and binding them to a contract placing individuals into indentured servitude status. This system is gaining increasing scrutiny by international human rights organizations, lawyers, and media.

## The Arab Spring Effect on the Persian Gulf States

On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian man committed self-immolation after an insult by a female police officer, which led to demonstrations and riots. This incident quickly spread across North Africa, the Levant, and the Persian Gulf States—including Iran—in response to authoritarian monarchies and dictators known as the “Arab Spring.” Libya exploded into civil war resulting in the removal and execution of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was removed from power; elections followed allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to gain power which resulted in the 2013 coup and military dictatorship. In Syria, the Arab Spring uprising initiated a violent sectarian civil war (still present in 2024) that impacted the geopolitics and human rights situation throughout the Persian Gulf States and intensifying the surrogate war regionally between Iran and the Arab Gulf States. In the spring of 2011, Iran faced growing internal opposition through the “Green Movement”—protests against the outcome of the 2009-2010 Presidential election—which continued through February 2011. Iraq remained unaffected as it faced continued sectarian violence and terrorism through Shia Militias and Sunni extremist groups. Kuwait has long faced the problem of stateless Arabs known as “Bidoons” (without) who cannot legally attend school, work, marry, or obtain medical assistance. Kuwaiti Bidoons initiated demonstrations garnering support from Kuwaiti citizens forcing the Government of Kuwait to resign in November 2011. Saudi Arabia experienced demonstrations targeting state discrimination against Shia Muslims and human rights violations that continued until early 2012, the first of its kind in the kingdom. King Abdullah

authorized ten billion riyals to offset high unemployment among the youth, though not addressing human or women's rights issues. In 2011, Saudi Arabia deployed troops into Bahrain concerned the Shia majority would topple the Sunni minority monarchy and give Iran a new ally among the Persian Gulf States. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman escaped unscathed from the Arab Spring uprisings. Iran, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia faced demonstrations that produced little change to human rights and civil liberties. Freedom House upgraded Kuwait from "not free to partly free" citing the election process leading to a new Parliament but still lacking due to censorship and laws that prevented the formation of political parties. Overall, the Arab Spring uprising had little impact on Persian Gulf States. However, the situation in Syria increased Arab State tensions with Iran causing domestic dilemmas influencing representative government, human rights, and civil liberties related to state security.

### How Iran Impacts Persian Gulf States Efforts to Liberalize

After the 1979 overthrow of Shah Pahlavi and the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, the new regime feared counter-revolution and moved quickly to consolidate power and control, which led to the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC). First and foremost, the IRGC acted as a secret police to target domestic opposition and, arrest those with suspected of ties to the Shah (as well as legitimate opponents of the Shah with different political objectives regarding the future of Iran). Evin Prison, which had been used by the Shah to jail and torture opponents, came under the control of the IRGC and continued to confine the new regime's opponents. In 2023, Evin Prison remained symbolic of the harshest oppression regarding human rights and civil liberties in the entire Persian Gulf. During the 1980s war with Iraq, the IRGC gained invaluable combat experience and evolved into a dominant asymmetric force that employed terrorism, subversion, and sabotage throughout



the 1980s' Lebanese civil war well into the twenty-first century. Iran is consistently assessed by international human rights organizations as a police state and state-sponsor of terrorism, with the IRGC as the primary arm. Throughout the region, the IRGC's efforts at destabilizing its Persian Gulf neighbors by supporting militia and Sunni and Shia Terrorist groups Hezbollah and Hamas ensures geopolitical tensions remain at a high level, negatively impacting efforts to liberalize. In December 2023, the United States Department of State, on its list of designated terrorist organizations, depicted these groups as transnational in nature. Since the 1979 revolution, the government of Iran—led by Ayatollahs—has experienced increasing opposition despite the threat of arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. In 1999, students at Tehran University demonstrated demanding freedom of the press and, in 2009, the Green Movement demonstrations against election fraud spread to additional cities. This resulted in government suppression and thousands of detentions and deaths. From 2017 through 2020, economic protests spread to multiple cities and resulted in thousands more deaths and detentions. In 2022, Mahsa Amini from Kurdistan, who was arrested and imprisoned for not wearing a hijab, died in custody initiating country-wide demonstrations. In 2024, these demonstrations had the intensity, size, and determination that had been unseen since 1979 and may be the first resistance movement there inspired, driven, and led by women—possessing the potential to create much-needed reform. Liberalization in Iran embracing representative government, respect for civil liberties, and human rights that can positively influence events throughout the entire Middle East/North Africa region is gaining momentum.

## Persian Gulf States in 2024 and Beyond

Historically, democratic institutions and traditions never emerged to build a foundation for growth and comparison

(except the Iraq monarchies that remain present in six Gulf States). Iraq remains in sectarian turmoil attempting a parliamentary federalist system and, in Iran, a theocratic police state faces increasing potential for revolution. Due to the sectarian, cultural, tribal, and historical composition of the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East-North Africa region, politics allows each state's domestic crisis to cross borders rapidly into regional problems. Sunni-Shia sectarian rivalries continue in Yemen and Syria while the current Israeli-Hamas war ensures regional friction points. Domestic security dilemmas preclude the evolution of representative government, human rights, and civil liberties. Geopolitics and economics play a major role as foreign workers hoping to gain a better life, continue to flock to the Gulf States from developing countries, while gaining increasing attention from international human rights organizations.

Despite enormous challenges, each state, including Iran and Iraq face growing populations that desire economic, social, and political freedom. Social media, the internet, students studying abroad, and the ease of international travel bypass government censorship attempts—allowing ideas to cross borders quickly. How regional events unfold in the coming years can lead to reform. Liberalization in Iran and Saudi Arabia would transform the entire Middle East-North Africa region. Saudi Arabia hopes to gain European tourism to Red Sea resorts, and Iran faces increasing opposition from the educated middle class, both potentially game changers spearheading regional transformation.

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Sergeant Major Mark Vorpahl (Retired) spent thirty three years in the United States Army, twenty eight in the Special Forces

with extensive experience in the Persian Gulf States, and has had experience in Southeast Asia, Africa and South America. He has lived in Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar. Mark was a participant in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn. From 2014 through 2023, he was an advisor and consultant to the United States Army.

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