Review of After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies


As they say, one should not judge a book by its cover. If one were to read this book without its cover and preface, one would come away convinced that the Gulf monarchies are facing serious challenges to their rule. Inside the book, from the introduction to the index, Davidson uses competent archival and interview research to document the internal and external pressures on the six Gulf monarchies and to draw relevant implications. Other than this, however, the book’s analytical competence is questionable. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, this book should be read by anyone interested in Arabian Gulf studies.

Even if one should not judge a book by its cover, the picture on the cover of this book truly is worth a thousand words. There, the faces of the six Gulf monarchs are emblazoned on dominoes, teetering on the brink of collapse. The implicit message is made explicit in the preface, when Davidson unabashedly predicts that “most of these regimes—at least in their present form—will be gone within the next two to five years” (vii, emphasis in original). Since he made this prediction in 2012, it means that at least four of the six Gulf monarchies will fall between 2014 and 2017. While this prediction appears to be inaccurate, what is most damning to Davidson’s argument is that he makes no attempt at all to link his theoretical or empirical analysis to this prediction. From the introduction to the index, there is no obvious mention of this 2–5 year prediction, except for the title of the sixth chapter, “The Coming Collapse.” This startling analytical oversight—bold prediction decoupled from evidence—is a critical weakness of the book and frames the debate over the book not on the evidence and argument, but on the flimsy prediction.

There are other analytical shortfalls, as well. Davidson makes no comparisons to countries that did experience the kind of change that his prediction would entail. In fact, I was in Egypt on the eve of the January 25 revolution, and in Palestine on the eve of the al-Aqsa Intifada; the general tension and anger at the status quo were palpable there, which stands in stark contrast to the comparatively placid state of politics when I arrived in the UAE, sometime after the Arab Spring had begun. In addition, Davidson’s analysis suffers from omitted variable bias; the strength and loyalty of the security services plays no real role in his argument. Instead, he assumes that the “coming collapse” is a function of external and internal pressures on the traditional Gulf monarchies alone. Had he taken the strength and loyalty of security forces into account, he likely would not have made such an ill-advised and anemic prediction about the fate of the Gulf monarchies.

The question, then, is whether the book should be read at all. From an academic perspective, the answer is an unqualified “yes”—no book is without

doi: 10.18278/gsis.1.2.9
flaws, and this is an opportunity to challenge Davidson on the interpretation of his evidence. In particular, it is important to ask, philosophically, whether a stiff response to opposition in the short term, followed by diffuse concessions in the longer term, constitutes a greater good than an immediate and destabilizing leap into democracy. This is an important question, and one that Davidson merely leaves implicit, focused as he is on the imperiled state of Western-style liberal activism in the Gulf, seemingly unable to see the larger issues at stake. In sum, After the Sheikhs is a book that is at least as insightful for its failings as for the evidence it presents, and it is always worth having an academic discussion about that.

Nathan W. Toronto

UAE National Defense College, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates