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ARTICLE

Comparative Struggles for Self-Determination in the Arabian Gulf: Challenging British Hegemony

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Abstract
The Arabian Gulf has a chequered history of subjugation and alliances of interest with the British, chiefly as a means of averting Ottoman and other external political control. However, there is evidence that Gulf people had always desired independence from British rule and domination. This aspiration was manifested in the adoption of Arab nationalism as an ideological foundation, both in opposition to the British and in pursuit of a pan-Arab union. Attempts for self-determination found their expression in the formation of distinct groups, associations and clubs whose key concern was the granting of constitutional civil liberties. These groups were directly predicated on Arab nationalism and flourished for roughly a decade from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. Political activism exhibited in the Arabian Gulf during this period evinces a high degree of awareness of regional as well as global politics. It shows that Arabs in the Gulf were neither docile adherents to British rule nor happily subservient to the dictates of Westminster. The article's analysis, while drawing on all Gulf Arab states, places particular emphasis on social movements in Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait, where such movements were considerably more active than in neighbouring countries.

Introduction

It may come as a surprise to many in the West, and equally within the Arab region, that the peoples of the Arabian Gulf organised mass mobilisation movements in the late 1940s and 1950s against British rule. These movements had the aim of securing a broad range of constitutional freedoms. At that time social movements were scarce, including in Europe. In the Western popular imagination, the Gulf is often portrayed as a monolithic and historically static region, in which vast oil and gas reserves have forged a specific social contract with ruling elites – one that foregrounds extensive economic rights at the expense of constitutional claims in respect of political rights. By extension, it is often unthinkable that people in the region may have ever coalesced against oppressive rule or that the current constitutional arrangements of these sheikhdoms could have emerged as the direct result of such struggle. Indeed, despite the monarchical structure of modern Gulf states, this article shows that the political philosophy of Arab nationalism was the driving force underlying mass mobilisation in the Gulf. This not only culminated in independence from British colonial rule, but also the forging of constitutional claims, some of which found recognition in the newly independent sheikdoms, kingdoms and emirates. These claims are increasingly echoed in modern times in the form

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of amendments in national constitutions, such as that of Qatar in 2024 and recent constitutional developments in Kuwait.[1]

As a political ideology, Arab nationalism was certainly not a newcomer to Arab struggles to achieve independence, self-determination and unity among Arab peoples.[2] Arab nationalism is hardly a unitary ideology. It developed through a series of modifications from a nascent and very much anti-Ottoman notion in the late nineteenth century to its heyday in the 1950s, including its application by the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970).[3] In fact, had it not been for Nasser, Arab nationalism might have remained a popular narrative with no practical application. Nasser is generally credited with putting the ideals of Arab nationalism into practice through the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, which was then under British and French control. Nasser did not hesitate to link the nationalisation of the Suez Canal to the colonial humiliation suffered by the Egyptian people.[4] In an unparalleled move for a developing country at that time, Nasser broke ranks with the powerful Western alliance and forged military and financial ties with the Eastern, Communist bloc of states, while still remaining part of the capitalist global domain. He further opposed the so-called Baghdad Pact as an imperial device.[5] Given the long oppression of Arabs, whether in the Gulf or North Africa, these political manoeuvres were met with significant enthusiasm. This marked the first time that an Arab leader had stood firmly on behalf of ordinary Arabs while openly challenging the colonial rule of France and Britain.[6] As a result, Nasser was famously depicted by the masses as embodying the very core of Arab nationalism.[7]

The greatest endeavour underlying the pursuit of Arab nationalism had always been the unification of the Arab world under a single entity. Nationhood is no easy matter, but Nasser somehow managed to carve a new state entity by fusing Syria and Egypt, ultimately creating the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958. Although this entity was swiftly broken up into discrete parts, revealing the complexities of pan-Arab unity, it marked the climax of Arab nationalist ambition and offered a paradigmatic (if imperfect) model of how pan-Arab union could operate, and provided the necessary impetus for self-determination struggles in other parts of the Middle East. Chief among these was the ousting of the British-controlled monarch of Iraq, which by the late 1950s had become a major source of crude oil, by Abdul Kareem Qasim, who advocated Arab nationalist ideas and was quick to hail the spirit of Nasserite politics.[8] The sweeping tide of Nasserite ideals and the spread of Arab

[1]See Eleni Polymenopoulou, 'Sharia and Human Rights Law in the Constitutional Framework of Gulf States' (2024) 46 Human Rights Quarterly 1 (who showcases the pioneering jurisprudence of the Kuwaiti Constitutional Court, which has addressed sensitive issues such as transgender rights, female representation in the national parliament and others); equally, Ilias Bantekas, 'Migrant Labor Reforms as Human Rights Legacy of the 2022 FIFA World Cup' (2024) 41 Wisconsin International Law Journal 101 (arguing that the introduction, even to a limited extent, of collective labour rights goes against the fundamental principle of sponsorship/kafala in the Gulf, which is predicated on an individualised labour contract).

[2]Stephen Humphreys argues that 'of all the ideologies that have played on the Middle Eastern stage in this century - bourgeois liberalism, Marxism, Islamism - none has excited more hope and anxiety, than Arab nationalism' (R Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age* (University of California Press 1999) 61). Along the same lines, Adeed Dawisha states that people nowadays 'tend to forget the majesty that Arab nationalism once was' (Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton University Press 2003) 312). Furthermore, Martin Kramer argues that at a certain point 'no Arab state seemed capable of withstanding the march of Arab unity' (see Martin Kramer, 'Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity' (1993) 122 Daedalus 171, 187).

[3]The challenges, victories, and setbacks of Arab nationalism in 'the 1950s and 1960s was inexorably linked to Egypt and its charismatic president' see Adeed Dawisha, 'Requiem for Arab Nationalism' (2003) 10 Middle East Studies Quarterly 25.

[4]Omnia El Shakry (ed), *Understanding and Teaching the Modern Middle East* (University of Wisconsin Press 2020) 96.

[5]The Baghdad Pact, which was endorsed by the United States and was signed by the United Kingdom, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, was meant to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining more influence in the area. The US government hoped Nasser would eventually sign the Pact, but he instead denounced it as Western imperialism. See Michael S Mayer, *The Eisenhower Years* (Infobase Publishing 2009) 43. See also Elie Podeh, *The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World: The Struggle over the Baghdad Pact* (Brill 1995).

[6]Raymond W Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution Under Nasser and Sadat* (Harvard University Press 2013) 39.

[7]ibid 40.

[8]Dawisha (n 2) 212.

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nationalism certainly ignited more than just a spark in several Gulf territories, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and the Trucial States (now United Arab Emirates (UAE).[9] Local Arab populations began to believe that self-determination was within their grasp, which in turn gave rise to a new set of institutions seeking independence from the British on the basis of the ideology propagated by Nasser. Their end game was not always apparent, albeit self-determination was viewed as a way of pan-Arab unity, irrespective of the eventual constitutional order that might emerge.

One of the challenges was determining the practical form that resistance should take. There was nothing equivalent to a local parliament, or a Shura Council, in which local populations could express their collective views. All matters were decided by Westminster on behalf of the local population. It is no wonder that a large number of entities, in the form of literary and cultural organisations (as well as sports clubs) were set up in the 1950s in order to advance political demands predicated on Arab nationalism. No doubt, these entities could not outwardly exhibit their true aims.[10] Unlike the guarantees of democracy, the rule of law and freedom of expression in the British mainland, none of these civil liberties were available to the local population in the Arabian Gulf[11] – a practice typical of colonial powers in Asia and Africa.

This article is organised as follows. It first examines the process towards purposeful alliances, subjugation and later self-determination of the Arab territories in the Gulf. It then explores the political and ideological contribution of Arab nationalism, on the basis of which a pan-Arabist political conscience was nurtured in the Gulf. This is followed by an examination of the rise of social movements in Qatar and similar movements in Bahrain. The article then analyses the Kuwaiti experience and its embrace of the so-called Cairo Charter before taking a brief look at the limited existence of social movements in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While references to the UAE are scattered throughout the paper, there is no section specifically devoted to developments there.

Gulf territories and their progress towards purposeful self-determination

Britain did not invade the Gulf territories directly. Its policy in the Middle East was calculated and patient. It consistently conveyed to local rulers that its presence was not intended to be permanent, while strategically taking advantage of Arab animosity toward Ottoman rule. Although they were sharing the same religion, the Ottomans had managed to alienate Gulf Arabs, resulting in long-standing resistance. This resistance differed across regions, while the Ottomans fought to protect Libya from Italian invasion, their governance of other Arab territories was frequently perceived as oppressive, fuelling the struggle for independence against Ottoman rule and hegemony.[12] Britain seized the opportunity and created alliances with Arabs, who effectively supplied their own military

[9]The article employs the term 'Trucial States' for the period before independence in 1971. In 1892, the sheikhdoms of the UAE, which were known at the time as 'the Trucial States, joined together to sign a treaty with Great Britain. Under this treaty, they agreed to protect the coastline against any maritime-based aggression and help counteract any land-based attack. See Miriam Joyce, 'On the Road Towards Unity: The Trucial States from a British Perspective' (1999) 35 Middle Eastern Studies 45. Furthermore, an article written in 1969, two years before UAE gained independence, labels the country as 'the seven Trucial Omani States', referring to Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Fujairah, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman, and Ras Al Khaimah, which makes up the UAE today, see Fred Halliday, 'Class Struggle in the Arab Gulf' (1969) 58 New Left Review 31.

[10]See Miro Cerar, 'The Relationship Between Law and Politics' (2009) 12 Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law 19, who argues that 'the law functions in relation to politics in three basic aspects, namely as a goal, a means, or an obstacle'.

[11]It is important to note that at that time, there was little international pressure for Gulf countries to move towards a more democratic governance. The lack of international pressure made authoritarianism more robust in the Gulf. See Stephen J Ramos, 'An Historical Examination of Territory and Infrastructure in the Trucial States', in Mehran Kamrava (ed), *Gateways to the World: Port Cities in the Persian Gulf* (Oxford University Press 2016) 93; Robert Landen, 'The Arab Gulf in the Arab World 1800–1918' (1986) 1 Arab Affairs 59.

[12]See George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (Hamilton 1938) (which is a classic text by the founding fathers of Arab nationalism and its early struggle against Ottoman oppression).

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forces to fight British wars against the Ottomans. These alliances were naturally followed by a number of discreet and politically meticulous maritime defence treaties, collectively known as the Maritime Truce, entered into with the rulers of the Trucial States in 1835, Bahrain in 1861, Kuwait in 1899 (*de facto*), and Qatar in 1916.[13] Local rulers had little option but to consent to these agreements under the assumption that they would free them from Ottoman interference, and that, at some point, the British would grant them independence.[14] In addition, the Gulf rulers signed further treaties with the British Governments of Bombay and India, including the so-called Exclusive Agreements, binding them into exclusive treaty relations with, and ceding control of their external affairs to, the British Crown. These agreements were signed by the Ruler of Bahrain in 1880 and 1892, the Rulers of the Trucial States in 1888 and 1892, the Ruler of Kuwait in 1899, the Saudi Ruler of Najd and Hasa in 1915 (annulled in 1927),[15] and finally the Ruler of Qatar in 1916.[16] This was a peculiar arrangement, which entailed that while the kingdoms' rulers retained their (hereditary) status as heads of state, they were part of the constitutional arrangements (as protected overseas territories) of both the British Indian Empire and the Crown itself.[17]

Before the Gulf entities gained statehood in the early 1970s, there existed a tapestry of sheikhdoms. While Saudi Arabia was the most politically coherent and unified among all these – and hence gained independence relatively early – all other entities remained under British rule well until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Having originally served as maritime outposts for the British, the discovery of oil in Iran (1908), Bahrain (1932), Kuwait (1938), Qatar (1940), Abu Dhabi (1958), and Oman (1964), altered the British perception of the utility of the Gulf. These territories quickly became a prized possession that was not to be given any sort of independence without something in return. Britain also reinforced its military position in the Gulf. In equal measure, the British created a (general concession) treaty that included all the Gulf regions, which allowed them, in addition to security arrangements, to retain a sovereign presence in the Gulf for a period of one hundred and fifty years.[18] General sentiment in the Gulf regions was against these agreements, but there was a clear understanding that the British were prepared to use force to establish a firm presence in the Gulf.

Going a few years back, in 1916, the ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani, signed a protection treaty with Britain that initially included eleven clauses. However, in order to safeguard the sovereignty of the state, Sheikh Abdullah rejected three clauses put forward by the British, namely: the seventh clause that allowed British nationals to compete with the local population in pearl trade;

[13]See Stephen J Ramos, 'An Historical Examination of Territory and Infrastructure in the Trucial States', in Mehran Kamrava (ed), *Gateways to the World: Port Cities in the Persian Gulf* (Oxford University Press 2016) 93; Landen (n 11).

[14]See James Onley, 'The Politics of Protection in the Gulf: The Arab Rulers and the British Resident in the Nineteenth Century' (2004) 6 New Arabian Studies 30, who refers to tribute relations and subsequent tribute payments by some sheikhdoms, particularly Bahrain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[15]David Roberts, 'The Consequences of the Exclusive Treaties: A British View', in B R Pridham (ed), *The Arab Gulf and the West* (Croom Helm, 1985) 1; Husain Al-Baharna, *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States: A Study of Their Treaty Relations and Their International Problems* (Manchester University Press 1968). On 15 January 1902, Ibn Saud captured Riyadh from the Rashid tribe. In 1913, his forces captured the province of Al-Hasa from the Ottoman Turks. In 1922, he completed his conquest of the Nejd, and in 1925, he conquered the Hijaz. In 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed with Ibn Saud as king.

[16]See James Onley, *Britain, and the Gulf Shaikhdoms 1820 - 1971* (Center for International and Regional Studies 2009). Consequently, the British authorities established two parallel systems of justice. Colonial/civil courts administered English and colonial laws, whereas local courts were entrusted with the administration of Islamic law. Nizar Hamzeh, 'Qatar: The Duality of the Legal System' (1994) 30 Middle Eastern Studies 79.

[17]The authority to govern dependent territories was traditionally vested to the Westminster Parliament and the prerogative powers of the Crown. In *Tito v Waddell (No 2)*, [1977] Ch 106, per Megarry VC, it was held that the sovereignty of the Crown exists in 'the sense of government, power, ownership and belonging'. This in turn is the legal basis for Parliament's legislative authority in dependent territories. There exist a number of conventions (embodied into statute) and common law rules that serve to limit Parliament's power to legislate in such territories. For example, this is true where a colony has been allowed to establish its own representative legislature. *Campbell v Hall*, [1774] 1 Cowp 204.

[18]See Antoine Mattah, *Alkhalej Alarabi: mn Alestemar Albretani hatta Althawra Aleraniya* [The Arabian Gulf: from British Colonialism until the Iranian Revolution] (Dar Aljeel 1993) 11.

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the eighth clause that provided for the appointment of a British resident commissioner in Qatar; and finally, the ninth clause that allowed Britain to establish a post and telegraph office in the country. Sheikh Abdulla considered these clauses to threaten the sovereignty of the country, and so only eight of the original eleven clauses remained. This agreement was in place for a period of about twenty years, and in 1935 it was extended with a set of new provisions. The very fact that an agreement was negotiated and signed is evidence that the rulers of Qatar succeeded, at least in parts, to avert political subjugation by the British. The road to complete independence was a short distance away in 1971. This was a victory for Arab nationalism because the various agreements with Britain prevented the placement of Gulf territories under the League of Nations mandate system, whose outcome was uncertain as the Palestine situation demonstrated.[19] These protectorate agreements, unlike the secret agreements between the Great Powers that emerged from World War I, allowed the Gulf states to remain well clear from the perils of colonialism in the early part of the twentieth century and prevented them from becoming the subject of a global bargain between the colonial powers.[20]

The contribution of Arab nationalism to social movements resisting foreign hegemony in the Gulf

While Britain was plotting to cement its power base in the Gulf and capitalise on the oil wealth there, it could not have been oblivious to the rising fever associated with the rise of Arab nationalism. Nasser was already hugely popular throughout the Arab world, and it would be only a matter of time until there was a general revolt in the Gulf. Britain attempted to create a new regional alliance in the Arabian Gulf by making Gulf sheikhdoms partners to the Baghdad Pact, but this initiative was doomed to fail because independence, as it turned out, was not far away.[21] Radio, and particularly Egypt's Voice of Arabs, was a potent tool that warned Arabs of the perils of the Baghdad Pact. The huge impact of this Egyptian radio programme in the Arab world was recognised by the British colonial forces from the very beginning, as evidenced by a British agent stationed in Kuwait, who wrote in 1935 that

> The new method [i.e., radio] of receiving the news of the world in Arabic, with Egyptian comments thrown in, is not only significant but contains very great possibilities for both good and harm. Let us hope that the Egyptian broadcasting service is under proper control.[22]

Therefore, it was no surprise that the British colonial powers sought to stifle Arab media and curtailed the right to freedom of expression as a means of clinging on to their treasured possessions.[23] A 1958 report by the Joint Intelligence Committee acknowledged that Egyptian radio broadcasts

[19]See Pitman B Potter, 'Origin of the System of Mandates under the League of Nations' (1922) 16 American Political Science Review 563; Warren F Riggs, *Wards of the UN: Trust and Dependent Areas* (Foreign Policy Association, 1950); Cearmian Edwards Toussaint, *The Trusteeship System of the United Nations* (Stevens & Sons 1956); Francis B Sayre, 'Legal Problems Arising from the United Nations Trusteeship System' (1948) 42 American Journal of International Law 263.

[20]An analysis of a series of secret agreements between Britain and France during World War I with the aim of securing Arab allegiance against the Ottomans is beyond the scope of this article. For more information about this period, which is certainly not unconnected to the civil rights movements explored here, see Anthony Anghie, 'Introduction to Symposium on the Many Lives and Legacies of Sykes–Picot' (2016) 110 American Journal of International Law 105; Seymour Cocks, *The Secret Treaties and Understandings: Text of the Available Documents* (Union of Democratic Control 1918) 11. It should be noted that the 1920 Franco-British Convention on Certain Points Connected with the Mandates for Syria and Lebanon, Palestine and Mesopotamia, was effectively meant to consolidate British rule over Transjordan as part of the British Mandate of Palestine. See Lloyd George, *The Truth About the Peace Conference* (University of California Press 1938, vol 2) 1167–75, 1182–90.

[21]Syyed Abdul Rahem Abu Khobar, *Siyasat Abdel Nasser Alarabiya (1952-1970)* [Abdel Nasser's Arab Politics] (Al Manhal 2016) 156. See (n 5) for a brief analysis of the Baghdad Pact.

[22]Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 2010) 11.

[23]Mohammed Ghanim Al-Rumaihi, 'عالناصرية في الخليج العربي' ['Nasserism in the Arabian Gulf'], *al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya* (Tripoli, no 12, October 1974), republished at <https://rumaihi.info/2019/05/12> accessed 9 Mar 2026.

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had adversely impacted British interests, noting their role in influencing every major crisis in recent years.[24] The Voice of Arabs had already managed to enter most Arab homes. In Oman, by way of illustration, it played a defining role in the country's struggle for independence and self-determination.[25] The same is true of the entire Middle East.[26]

In 1958, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Sabah demanded that Kuwait join the Arab League, but the response was negative because the British feared this would turn out to be the first step towards pan-Arab domination in the Arab world.[27] No doubt, when news of this rejection reached the Arab public, hostility towards the British became even higher.[28] The British rightly feared that the rising popularity of Arabism had culminated in a popular and robust desire for a sovereign united Arab state. Reports at the time suggested that Iraq would be the first to depart from British influence and control.[29] Indeed, the Iraqi revolution of 1958 is considered the peak of Arab nationalism.[30] According to Dawisha, Arabs at that time believed that all the enemies of Arab nationalism were defeated.[31] The period following Abdulkareem Qasim's toppling of the pro-Western King in Iraq marked the zenith of Arab nationalism's ascent.[32] Following the Iraqi revolution, the ecstatic and energised masses adamantly believed that they had witnessed the final and humiliating defeat of those they considered enemies of Arab nationalism.[33] With the 1958 revolution, the Iraqi authorities announced the establishment of the republic and the formation of a Sovereignty Council exercising presidential powers.[34] It is with the Sovereignty Council's approval that the Council of Ministers was to assume legislative authority.[35]

Iraq underwent a series of *coups d'état*, but this was the most significant, culminating in the cementing of Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. In the new interim constitution, article 1 stated that the Iraqi state was an independent republic with full sovereignty. Article 2 declared Iraq as part of the Arab nation.[36] This is a significant transformation to the advantage of Arab nationalists, as the constitution that preceded it, the 1925 Iraqi constitution, did not mention Arab or Arabism except in article 17, which stipulated that 'Arabic is the official language, except for what is stipulated by a special law.'[37]

By laying the groundwork for Arab nationalism, Egypt had become the flag bearer of ideological nationalism in the Gulf.[38] It went on to speak on behalf of all Arabs.[39] Through the important role

[24] Athol Yates, 'Britain's key counter-subversion instrument before the 1971 withdrawal from the Gulf: Voice of the Coast [Sawt Al Saahil] Arabic radio station'. (2023) 38 Intelligence and National Security 57.

[25] Emad bin Jassim Al-Bahrani, 'عجمال عبد الناصر والحركات السياسية في عُمان' ['Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Political Movements in Oman'], *Nizwa* (14 August 2019), <https://www.nizwa.om/> accessed 9 Mar 2026.

[26] Douglas A Boyd, 'Development of Egypt's Radio: 'Voice of the Arabs' under Nasser' (1975) 52 Journalism Quarterly 645.

[27] Hesham Alawadi, 'Ghesatni Ma' Aluruba' [Our Story with Arabism] Alqabas (12 April 2017) <https://www.alqabas.com/article/381853-%D9%82%D8%B5%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A9> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[28] Another feature that highlights the preponderance of Arab nationalism in the Kuwaiti general consciousness was the fact that citizenship and loyalty were linked to Arab nationalism. See Rana Almutawa, 'Monolithic Representations of 'Arabness': From the Arab Nationalists to the Arab Gulf' LSE Middle East Center Blog, (18 December 2018) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/12/18/monolithic-representations-of-arabness-from-the-arab-nationalists-to-the-arab-gulf/> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[29] 'Points for a Middle East Policy: Proposed Ministerial Paper' (1958) Arabian Gulf Digital Archive CAB 134/2342 <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/cab/134/2342/n/239> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[30] Dawisha (n 2) 212.

[31] ibid.

[32] ibid.

[33] ibid.

[34] 'Provisional Constitution 1958' Republic of Iraq Supreme Judicial Council, <https://www.sjc.iq/view.85/> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[35] ibid.

[36] ibid.

[37] 'Basic Law 1925' Republic of Iraq Supreme Judicial Council <https://www.sjc.iq/view.86/> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[38] Abu Khobar (n 21) 158.

[39] ibid 158-59.

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played by Nasser in African and Asian organisations as well as in the Non-Aligned Movement forum, the Gulf cause had gained wide support.[40] Asian, African and the non-aligned countries declared their support to the Gulf countries in the United Nations and other international organisations.[41] Egypt was also able to achieve the support of public opinion in the continents of Asia and Africa through a series of public conferences.[42] The Asian-African Peoples Solidarity Conference on 27 December 1957 in Cairo affirmed the right of Gulf states to obtain independence, and denounced acts of oppression and brutality committed by the British occupation forces against the national movements in the Gulf emirates.[43]

A month after this conference, the *Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization* (AAPSO), a non-governmental pluralist and democratic alliance, was formed.[44] According to article 2(1) of its Constitution, AAPSO fully adhered to the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement and the UN Charter. The first and sixth paragraphs of article 2 highlighted the rights of the people that AAPSO defended. The first paragraph stipulated that the objective of the organisation was:

> to unite, consolidate and accelerate actions of solidarity with the struggle against all forms of aggression, racism, and to provide all-out moral, political and material support to the protection of freedom, and national independence.

Article 6(2)(b) of the AAPSO Constitution set forth yet another objective, namely:

> to propagate the Charter of Universal Declaration of Human Rights including implementation of all the statutes, conventions, treaties and covenants passed and accepted by the United Nations Organization over the years.

In addition to these international organisations, Nasser continued supporting the Gulf under the banner of Arabism through regional organisations. Bahrain, as a small island vulnerable to foreign attacks, received the attention of Nasser slightly more than its neighbours. In 1954, through the Arab League, Egypt rebutted Persian (now Iranian) claims that Bahrain was part of its territory, and that the landing of aircrafts at Bahrain's airport was not permitted without prior permission from Iran. Through the declarations of its foreign minister, Nasser's government asserted Bahrain's Arabism and rejected all Persian allegations that Bahrain was subservient to Persia.[45] This political intervention allowed Bahrain to showcase its own foreign affairs concerns in international forums.

Egypt further adopted the cause of the Gulf and the people of Bahrain at the national level.[46] The Egyptian government presented the Gulf cause to Arab summit conferences, and demanded the need for joint Arab action to develop these countries and resist British ambitions in the region.[47] A treaty signed in May 1966 by the British government and the Bahraini Minister of Finance, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, caused unrest among Arab nationalists.[48] The treaty allowed for the expansion of Britain's military bases, and granted British soldiers the right of residence along with

[40]ibid.
[41]ibid.
[42]ibid.
[43]David Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* (Oxford University Press 2006) 55.
[44]Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization, *Constitution of the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization* <https://www.stichtingargus.nl/bvd/pub/aapso.pdf> accessed 9 Mar 2026; عمنظمة تضامن الشعوب الآسيوية الإفريقية ['Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization'], *al-Mawsu'a al-'Arabiyya* (The Arabic Encyclopedia), vol 19 (Damascus 2007) 648 <https://mail.arab-ency.com.sy/details/14142> accessed 9 Mar 2026.
[45]See Hussain Ghabbash, *Aljuthor Althagafeya Leldemocratiya fe Alkhalij: Alkuwait wa Albahrain* [The Cultural Roots of Democracy in the Gulf: Kuwait and Bahrain] (Dar Al Faraby 2010) 2-10.
[46]Abu Khobar, (n 21) 160-162.
[47]ibid.
[48]See Thomas Huang, 'Some International and Legal Aspects of the Suez Canal Question' (1957) 51 American Journal of International Law 277.

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judicial and customs privileges.[49] All this was in return for an increase in financial subsidies provided by the British government to Bahrain.[50] Egypt firmly opposed the continuation of colonial policy in Bahrain.[51] It launched its campaign against Bahrain's rogue rulers on the basis that they were acting against the people's desires and national aspirations.[52] Egypt requested Arab countries to quickly provide aid and financial and technical assistance to these countries to meet their Arab nationalist goals.[53] This financial and technical aid was specifically focused on the Trucial States and Oman due to their relative progressiveness. Egypt believed that these two countries required effective aid from their Arab brethren.[54] Nasser believed that they were in need of doctors, engineers and teachers, and that if they were left alone, they would have to accept the help of Britain and perhaps Iran. He saw that the foreign immigration that would ensue as a result would threaten Arab identity of the region.[55] Therefore, Nasser initiated a project in December 1964 to send a delegation of Egyptian and Arab experts to develop a joint Arab plan to support and develop the Trucial States and Oman and preserve their Arab identity.[56] The delegates of the mission reported from their trip that the two countries were in need of cultural, medical and social support from Arab countries.[57]

Another factor that played a role in promulgating Nasserist Arab nationalism among the people in the Gulf was Kuwait's Arabist-oriented education system. This was facilitated by the relatively liberal and progressive conditions in Kuwait compared to other Gulf countries, as explained in more detail in the section dealing with Kuwait below. Many civil society organisations, such as schools, charities, and political and cultural organisations, received financial assistance from Kuwait's Educational Department.[58] The Department's foreign aid was connected to its increasing participation in the Arab world starting in 1950. This allowed the Kuwaiti Department of Foreign Aid to develop its regional networks while fostering inter-Arab collaboration in areas including education, culture, social work, and sports.[59] By 1958, Kuwait started to organise these regional gatherings on its own.[60]

Between the start of Kuwait's scholarship programme in 1953 and the year of the nation's independence in 1961, the Kuwaiti Education Department was heavily influenced by Arab nationalism.[61] Talal Al-Rashoud contends that Kuwait's 'Arab Scholarships', which were inspired by pan-Arab ideas, also benefited from social networks connecting Kuwaiti educators and authorities

[49]Mufid Alzaidi, *Altayrat Alfikrya fe Alkhalij Alarabi 1938-1971* [The Intellectual Trends in the Arabian Gulf 1938-1971] (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2020) 77.

[50]Chelsi Mueller, *Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict: Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf between the World Wars* (Cambridge University Press 2020) 191.

[51]ibid 195-197.

[52]ibid.

[53]ibid 202-207.

[54]ibid.

[55]ibid 210-215.

[56]See generally James P Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 2002) (exploring Nasser's quest for nationhood and Arab identity through the creation of the United Arab Republic, despite the great difficulties that existed, particularly the desire of Arab elites to rule lands under their control).

[57]Hassan Ghabbash, *Aljuthor Althagafeya Leldemocratiya fe Alkhalij: Alkuwait wa Albahrain* [The Cultural Roots of Democracy in the Gulf: Kuwait and Bahrain] (Dar Al Faraby 2010).

[58]Talal Al-Rashoud, 'From Muscat to the Maghreb: Pan-Arab Networks, Anti-colonial Groups, and Kuwait's Arab Scholarships (1953–1961)' (2019) Arabian Humanities 1 (again, emphasising how Kuwaiti social movements sought to exercise their claims through a sustained campaign of education, information and social change, rather than engage in an armed struggle against the British).

[59]ibid.

[60]ibid 3-7.

[61]Hilary Kalisman, 'Bursary Scholars at the American University of Beirut: Living and Practicing Arab Unity,' (2015) 42 British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 599 (explaining how these scholarships were meant to foster and identify the next generation of scholars that would galvanise and reinforce Arab nationalism and its ideals).

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to nationalist activists across the region.[62] Along with other governments, the Department also provided scholarships to a number of anti-colonial political organisations. By expanding into new endeavours, these groups were able to capitalise on the presence of their student missions in the affluent and rather liberal Gulf states.

Another post-World War II anti-colonial instrument that arose in the context of Arab nationalism was the Charter of Arab Cultural Unity of 1964.[63] According to the constitution of the organisation, Arab states agreed to the Charter of Arab Cultural Unity in response to the feeling of natural unity among the sons of the Arab nation and the belief that the unity of thought and culture was the mainstay on which Arab unity was based.[64] It was also ratified as a follow-up to the achievements of the adoption of the Charter of the Arab League.[65] Another purpose of the ratification of this Charter was the deposition of colonialism, as the Charter states

> this is a proud gesture of the accession of parts of the Arab world to the League of Arab States after the liberation of these parts from the bondage of colonialism and we are looking forward to the Arabs regaining their sacred usurped lands and completing their freedom in all parts of their homeland.[66]

A further purpose of the Charter was to enhance cooperation in the fields of education and culture.[67] For Arab society, this cooperation culminated in guaranteeing human rights to education, freedom, dignity and well-being.[68] As for Arab nationalism, this cooperation led to 'accentuating the Arab personality in the global sphere and its ability to stand up to the global forces of evil represented by colonialism and Zionism'[69], which defined the goals of Arab nationalism. Article 1 of the Charter explicitly stated that the goal of education was to raise a conscious and enlightened Arab generation that understood its national and humanitarian purpose. Education would enable the right of Arab society to freedom, security and a decent life.[70] The Charter's constitution suggested that freedom from colonialism led to security and decent life.[71]

The following sections explore the formation of these social movements, in whatever manifestation they appeared, starting with Qatar, which is otherwise viewed as the sleepy backdrop of the Arabian Gulf.

Social movements in Qatar

The reason why the Gulf governments tolerated nationalist activities to a certain extent is due to the sheer difficulty of sustaining the rising popularity of Arab nationalism. This popularity was evident in all Gulf countries, as Gulf societies experienced multiple demonstrations in support of the Arab nationalist tide during the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, several Gulf societies, such as Kuwait,

[62]Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Nasser's Educators and Agitators Across al-Watan al-'Arabi: Tracing the Foreign Policy Importance of Egyptian Regional Migration, 1952–1967,' (2016) 43 British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 324 (one of the key papers discussing how intra-Arab migration allowed the spread of Arab nationalist ideas in a manner resisted by colonial forces).

[63]Mithak Alwihda Altaghafiya Alrabiya [Charter of the Arab Cultural Unity] (adopted 1964 in the context of the Arab League). An English translation is available at <https://qistas.com/legislations/jor/view/MDEwMDA1=?lang=en> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[64]Art 1.

[65]<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/arableag.asp> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[66]Preamble.

[67]ibid, art 2.

[68]ibid, art 3.

[69]ibid, art 4.

[70]ibid, art 1.

[71]ibid.

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Bahrain and Qatar, witnessed public demonstrations in support of the Egyptian president and Arab nationalist leader Gamal Abdul Nasser during the 1956 Suez Crisis.

This popularity, along with the illegality of what it effectively promoted, led to the creation of cultural groups with a political hue. In Qatar, the cultural arena was a lively and vibrant place for Nasserists to operate. Many young people established sports clubs and gave them revolutionary names in line with what Abdel Nasser was proposing, such as the *Al-Ahrar* (free people) and *Tahrir* (freedom), *Al-Jumhuriya* (republic), *Al-Uruba* (Arabism), *Al-Wahda* (Unity), *Al-Kifah* (Struggle), *Al-Nasr* (victory) and others. All these names were a clear reflection of Arab nationalist fervent and adoration for Nasserite ideology.

In addition to these sports clubs, a number of literary clubs were established in the same period, which served to convey the nationalist values that swept Qataris at the time. Two names were pioneers in establishing literary clubs in Qatar: Abdulla Hussein Al-Naema and Ali Khalifa Al-Kuwari. Both Al-Naema and Al-Kuwari studied together in Cairo during Nasser's tenure.[72] In Qatar, Al-Naema established the Islamic Library Club in 1953, which included a number of fervent young Qataris influenced by Nasser's revolution in Egypt. This club did not last long, as it was shut down by the Qatari and British authorities only a year later.[73]

As for Al-Kuwari, he established the *Al-Talia* (Vanguard) Club in 1959. Most of its members were Nasserists and focused on perpetuating their ideology among the Qatari youth. According to Al-Kuwari, the activities of the club can be categorised in a threefold way: cultural (members issued articles and gave lectures on the Arab struggles), theatrical (they also performed theatrical plays that raised national and social issues) and excursions to all parts of Qatar.[74] Just like Al-Naema's Islamic Library Club, Al-Kuwari's *Al-Talia* was raided by authorities and shut down in 1961. British and Qatari police forces entered the club by force, broke its furniture and arrested its members for a period of twenty-one days. Al-Kuwari and another *Al-Talia* member formally requested from the deputy ruler Sheikh Khalifa to reopen the club, but the request was rejected.[75] The government kept an eye on these clubs and severely opposed them whenever their Nasserist activities increased. The authorities were aware of the implications and long-term effects of the ideas that were spread through these clubs, even if they did not present themselves as an overt political group.

While most Gulf countries established cultural groups expressing Arab nationalist principles, the local governments allowed their operations only to a certain degree. When these cultural manifestations of Arab nationalism turned into mass protests, they were quelled. This was the case in Qatar. According to Ibrahim Shahdad, a history professor at Qatar University, one of the main factors that played a role in the popular uprisings in Qatar in the 1950s and 1960 were the ideas of Arab nationalism sponsored by Nasser.[76] Nasserism bears an anti-colonialist revolutionary character, and at the same time, encourages Arabs to oppose the 'oppressive' regimes they are subjected to. Qataris were influenced by Nasserism to the extent that in 1956, they filled the streets of Doha in protest against the various policies followed by the government. Among this Arab nationalist spirit, Qatari protesters waved Egyptian flags and chanted anti-British slogans.[77] However, the most popular series of protests and subsequent government repressions in Qatar would take place in 1963.

1963 was a milestone in the history of Arab nationalism. In February, the fall of the Abdul Karim Qasim regime in Iraq by Baathist and pan-Arab officers ignited celebrations across the Arab world, and Qatar was no exception. Jubilant expatriates and nationals took to the streets to celebrate and express their support for the regime change in Iraq. Although Arab nationalists, including those in

[72] Ali Al-Kuwari, *Alawasaj* [Thistle] (Difaf Publishing 2011) ch 6.2.

[73] ibid, ch 3.3.

[74] ibid, ch 3.2.

[75] ibid.

[76] Ibrahim Shahdad, 'Alharak Alshabi fe Qatar 1950-1963' [People's Movement in Qatar 1950-1963' (2012) Gulf Center for Development Policies 604, 605.

[77] ibid 608.

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Qatar, initially had high hopes for Qasim after overthrowing the pro-Western monarchy in 1958, over time he distanced himself from the Arab nationalist movement. Instead, he pursued an isolationist, Iraq-first policy. He cracked down on Baathists and Nasserists and aligned himself with Iraq's Communist Party, whereupon he frustrated those who had once seen him as a champion of Arab unity. By 1963, his growing detachment from the Arab nationalist cause made his downfall at the hands of Baathist officers a major victory for the movement, igniting celebrations across the Arab masses, including those in Qatar. The Baathists, who rallied around the slogans '*Ummah Arabiyya Wahida That Risala Khalida*' ('One Arab Nation with an Eternal Message'), promised to steer Iraq back toward Arab nationalist goals. Just two months later, their commitment to unity was put into action through negotiations with Egypt and Syria for a potential union, reinforcing the belief that Qasim's removal was a necessary step toward a stronger, more unified Arab world.

The 1963 Unity Talks with Syria and Egypt culminated in a similar pattern of mass demonstrations and celebrations among Qataris.[78] Britain's growing concerns over Arab nationalism and Nasserist influence in Qatar were evident in a confidential annex to Qatar Diary No. 2 of 1963, prepared by the British Political Agency in Doha. The report noted that protesters openly chanted slogans in support of Nasser and Arab unity, which British officials saw as a clear sign that the nationalist sentiment from Cairo had begun to take root in Qatar.[79]

During the mass demonstrations and celebrations among Qataris, a dispute between a member of the ruling family and the demonstrators broke out an hour after the Arab nationalist demonstration was due to begin, resulting in several serious injuries. This changed the course of events from celebrations to a popular uprising.[80] A pan-Arab organisation called the Qatar National Unity Front was instantly formed, and its members prepared a reform-demanding petition signed by thousands of Qataris.

The petition was presented to the government and demanded the eradication of royal privilege,[81] the Arabisation of labour, the legalisation of trade unions and the creation of municipal councils composed of elected members. They also pushed for more transparency and accountability in the state's financial matters as well as greater political participation for the general public. As a response, the Qatari government, with the advice of British authorities, crushed the protest by arresting the dissidents and forcing them to migrate to Kuwait, Egypt, and Lebanon. In addition, Arab teachers who spread revolutionary Arab nationalist ideas were deported.

As the unrest escalated in April 1963, British officials in London and their representatives in the Gulf exchanged telegrams discussing how to manage the situation in Qatar. A Foreign Office cable dated 21 April 1963, which was sent just a day after demonstrators were shot in Doha, reveals Britain's direct role in coordinating the suppression of the protests.[82] To contain the situation, British officials advised the Ruler of Qatar to issue a public statement prohibiting further demonstrations while also promising to investigate and hold accountable the royal family members responsible for firing at protesters.[83] This was a crucial step taken by British colonial forces to maintain their rule and interests in the region.

[78]Dilip Hiro, *Inside the Middle East* (Routledge 2013) 10 (examines the forces at work within the Arab world, the domestic politics and economy of Israel and the state's relationship with the West and the Soviet Bloc, and the relationship between the Arabs and the West since the Ottoman Empire).

[79]FO 371/168850 page 15, British Political Agency, Confidential Annex to Qatar Diary No. 2 of 1963.

[80]Al-Kuwari (n 75) ch 3.2.

[81]When oil came to Qatar in 1949, Sheikh Abdulla could not face the pressure his family put on him. He abdicated, left the country, and 'left it for his son to deal with the importunities of the relatives. When further oil revenues reached the new ruler's bank accounts the British told him to spend it on public services or put it in reserve. Instead, he gave much of it to the sheiks, who plagued him with demands for ever larger allowances'. According to British reports, 'by mid-1952 the Al Thani received a third of the revenue. In 1958 they received a stunning 45 percent of revenues' (see Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies* (SUNY series in Middle Eastern studies 1999) 110.

[82]F.O.361/168851. Telegram No. 375, from London to Bahrain, 21 April 1963.

[83]Shahdad (n 79) 624.

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The Qatari government issued a statement of reform that is widely believed to be a measure of 'extinguishing the flames' of Arab nationalism.[84] The statement stipulated that: 'The time has come to begin the organizational steps for a comprehensive work plan to establish the foundation of that noble society – a society of justice, equality, order, and production.'[85]

While administrative and economic reforms were indeed implemented, the statement responded to some of the demands indirectly without mentioning the petition and promised reform. For instance, a municipal council was established as a response to demand number fifteen on the petition, which asked for 'the election of a municipal council representing all segments of society'.[86] However, the council was ultimately extremely ineffective and fruitless.

Despite these announcements, the Qatari authorities continued to repress dissidents, in line with the advice of British colonial forces.[87] Five Qataris studying in Cairo (who signed a student statement supporting the Qatari National Unity Front) were dismissed from their scholarships and ultimately lost their opportunity to study.[88] This move was part of a broader effort to suppress anti-colonial nationalist ideologies and eliminate their influence.[89] Throughout Nasser's tenure, no overt protests like this would occur again in Qatar.

The case of Qatar is emblematic of a civil rights movement within a British protectorate in the Arabian Gulf. Although these movements were suppressed, they left a lasting imprint on Qatar, shaping an enduring commitment to Arab solidarity and self-determination that later influenced its foreign policy. Over time, Qatar absorbed this legacy and positioned itself as a mediator in regional disputes, working to bridge internal Arab divisions and prevent wider conflicts.[90] Palestine, long at the heart of Arab nationalist ideology and a symbol of resistance to foreign domination, has remained central to Qatari diplomatic efforts. This was evident in the 2012 Doha Agreement, where Qatar played a key role in brokering reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas to form a unity government. A similar approach emerged in 2008, when Qatar mediated the Doha Accord, a power-sharing agreement that resolved Lebanon's eighteenth-month political crisis and prevented an escalation into civil war. These diplomatic efforts have continued into 2024, further reinforcing Qatar's status as an Arab mediator. In response to the 2023 Gaza war, Qatar facilitated indirect negotiations between Hamas and Israel, securing temporary ceasefires, coordinating humanitarian corridors, and negotiating prisoner exchanges.[91] At the same time, Qatar has been engaged in Lebanon's ongoing political deadlock, attempting to mediate between Hezbollah-aligned and opposition factions to prevent further destabilisation. These initiatives reflect the enduring influence of Arab nationalist ideals on Qatar's foreign policy, particularly the commitment to Palestinian liberation and intra-Arab unity. While the methods have shifted from revolutionary activism to diplomatic negotiation, the underlying principle remains unchanged: the belief in Arab agency, regional solidarity, and the responsibility to uphold the Palestinian cause.[92]

[84] Al-Kuwari (n 75) ch 3.2.

[85] Nor Al-Din Bin Habib Al-Hajlawi, Tather Alfikr Alnassry Ala Alkhalij Alarabi [Effect of Nasserism on the Gulf] (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2010) 225.

[86] Al-Kuwari (n 75) ch 3.2.

[87] Al-Hajlawi (n 89) 225.

[88] Al-Kuwari (n 75) ch 3.2.

[89] Al-Hajlawi (n 90) 225.

[90] See Ilias Bantekas, 'Engaging the UN Security Council in Zero Intensity Conflicts: Qatar's Embargo' (2019) 23 Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law 145.

[91] See Ilias Bantekas, 'Non Concession Policies and the 2023 Israel-Hamas Agreement in Context' (2024) 40 American University International Law Review 25.

[92] See Safaa S Jaber & Ilias Bantekas, 'The Status of Gaza as Occupied Territory under International Law' (2023) 73 International & Comparative Law Quarterly 1069; Ilias Bantekas & Safaa S Jaber, 'Occupiers' Human Rights Obligations with a Focus on Israel and the Gazan Population' (2024) 29 Journal of Conflict & Security Law 1.

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The conditions for fostering social movements in Bahrain

Bahrain, in addition to Kuwait, has distinct economic and social structures from other Gulf states.[93] These structures allowed Bahrain and Kuwait to modernise earlier than their Gulf neighbours. Arab nationalist movements in Bahrain were more robust, and repression against them was less severe. Early modernisation in Bahrain and Kuwait was a turning point in the advancement of socio-political movements. The concomitants that came with modernisation, such as quality education and the rise of civil society, created greater political opposition, eventually rendering Arab nationalist organisations during Nasser's tenure more robust. Quality education in Bahrain and Kuwait, as a result of modernisation, reinvigorated the social and political awareness of societies. The early discovery of oil gave governments the financial ability to develop education domestically, and to send its citizens to study abroad in more developed countries. Through education, students engaged with revolutionary ideas such as nationalism and anti-imperialism.

Therefore, it was primarily quality education that gave rise to civil society in Bahrain and Kuwait. As Steven Fish argues, if the resources of society are in the hands of just a few people (ie, the state), instead of other political movements, authoritarianism will naturally prevail.[94] Weaker civil society institutions in other Gulf countries hindered engagement with revolutionary ideas.[95] These other Gulf states had not yet benefited from the discovery of oil and gas, and with people living in relative poverty, they were unable to immerse themselves in any movement or respond to any political movements.[96] As a result of these factors, Bahrain and Kuwait have a longer history of mass mobilisation and political opposition. The long-standing political opposition created a more democratic society in these two countries.[97] Furthermore, the robustness of the opposition movements made it more difficult for the government to repress these.

Just like the Qataris, the Bahrainis opposed their government based on Arab nationalist principles. In 1954, the Bahraini Supreme Executive Committee was established. The Committee played an instrumental role in furthering the mass movement that took place in the political arena in Bahrain, which lasted for three years, after which the authorities were able to undermine this movement.[98] The Supreme Executive Committee consisted of one hundred members selected by Bahrainis.[99] The Committee took the form of an organised political party. It held its first meeting in 1954, when it conferred authority on certain leaders to submit national demands to the ruling authorities, namely

[93]The reason why this section focuses on Nasser's rule is that it was during this period the Gulf masses engaged with Arab nationalism the most. The period of fervent Arab nationalism was at its peak, see Mohammed Ghanim Al-Rumaihi, 'عالناصرية في الخليج العربي' ['Nasserism in the Arabian Gulf'], *al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya* (Tripoli, no 12, October 1974), republished at <https://rumaihi.info/2019/05/12> accessed 9 Mar 2026.

[94]Steven M Fish, 'Rethinking Civil Society: Russia's Fourth Transition' 1994 5 Journal of Democracy 31. In his research, Steven Fish studies the situation of Russia, and he observes that the weak civil society made them depend on state-led agencies, which makes opposition movements less likely. He contends that authoritarianism prevented Russia from having a robust civil society.

[95]Concerning weak civil society in Qatar and its relationship with law, Qatari Arab nationalist and long-standing dissident Ali Al-Kuwari claims that the overall legal framework in Qatar prevents the operations of a successful civil society, see Ali Al-Kuwari, 'Interview with Dr. Ali Khalifa Al Kuwari, author of "The People Want Reform… In Qatar, Too" - Statehood & Participation' (Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East, 3 Mar 2014), <https://web.archive.org/web/20180214073243/http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/interview-dr-ali-khalifa-al-kuwari-author-people-want-reform-qatar-too-statehood> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[96]Ibrahim Shahdad, 'Alharak Alshabi fe Qatar 1950-1963' [People's Movement in Qatar 1950-1963] Gulf Center for Development Policies (2012) 604.

[97]A book published in 2010 highlights the climax of democracy in Kuwait and Bahrain. The book's title is: *The Cultural Roots of Democracy in the Gulf: Kuwait and Bahrain*. See Hussain Ghabbash, *Aljuthor Althagafeya Leldemocratiya fe Alkhalij: Alkuwait wa Albahrain* [The Cultural Roots of Democracy in the Gulf: Kuwait and Bahrain] (Dar Al Faraby 2010).

[98]Falah Al-Mdaires, *Alharakat wa Aljama'at Alsiyasiya fe Albahrain 1938-2001* [Political Movements and Organizations in Bahrain 1938 - 2001] (Dar Alknoz Aladbiya 2004) 44.

[99]Abu Khobar (n 21) 157.

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Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa and the British political resident.[100] These demands called for the establishment of a legislative council by election. The task of this council would be to promulgate and enforce laws, reform the courts, allow the creation of trade unions for workers, and end foreign migration to Bahrain.[101] Members of the National Movement also called for the equal sharing of profits from oil revenues.

As a result of the work the Committee put in, a number of nationalist organisations emerged in Bahrain. They were secret political organisations such as the Arab Socialist *Ba'ath* Party and the Arab Nationalist Movement.[102] These organisations represented the main political opposition to the regime in Bahrain.[103] Another opposition group that existed in Bahrain since the late 1940s was the Sunni religious movement the 'Muslim Brotherhood'.[104] However, this religious movement was weakened as a result of the emerging robust Arab nationalist movement, which would override all socio-political movements in the region.[105]

The British authorities attempted to deactivate the national movement that led the popular uprisings in Bahrain.[106] They accused the national movement of igniting sectarianism among society, and made redundant the workers that supported the protesters.[107] The colonial authorities also took hold of Berber groups with the aim of terrorising nationalist figures.[108] All this was done out of fear of snowball effects. The possibility that the neighbouring Gulf societies would be motivated to emulate the Bahraini movement was high. The policy of violence and repression pursued by the British authorities in Bahrain led to the departure of some nationalist figures to neighbouring Arab countries. The same repressive pattern occurred two years later when Britain, France and Israel declared war on Egypt. The 1956 'Tripartite Aggression'[109] summoned Bahraini public opinion towards Arab nationalism. The opposition leadership played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion to confront the situation, most notably by issuing leaflet No. (78), which urged citizens to boycott British and French goods, refuse to load or unload ships from the two countries, and deny fuel to their aircraft.[110] The leaflet also called on Bahraini workers to withdraw from providing services to British colonial forces.[111] Bahrain's national movement declared its condemnation and anger at the war, and demonstrations spread throughout the country.

As a response to the opposition by the Bahraini public, the British authorities thwarted Bahraini opposition movements and expelled some of the leading figures outside Bahrain. The expulsion of Bahraini opposition leaders in 1956 was a coordinated effort between local British colonial authorities and the British government in London. Although the initial crackdown on nationalist protests, triggered by the Suez Crisis, was carried out by the Ruler of Bahrain with British advisors on the ground, London was fully briefed and implicitly approved the suppression.[112] The British

[100] ibid 165-168.

[101] Nelida Fuccaro, *History of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800* (Cambridge University Press 2009) 151-59 (an interesting exposition of social and political life of Bahrain since the early nineteenth century. In the case at hand, reference to this work is made to show political demands of Bahrainis during British rule).

[102] Al-Mdaires (n 101) 44.

[103] ibid 48.

[104] ibid 46.

[105] ibid 45.

[106] Abu Khobar (n 21) 165-67.

[107] ibid.

[108] ibid 161-163.

[109] The influence of this event was widely studied by scholars interested in Arab nationalism. It is considered a great triumph for Arab nationalists, and some observers pinpointed this event as the event that turned Nasser into an Arab nationalist hero. See for example Baker (n 5) 41.

[110] Jassim Hussain Alabbas, 'Almuqawama Alwattaniya llnfoth Albritani fe Albahrain' [The National Resistance to British Influence in Bahrain] (Sanawat Aljareesh), <https://www.jasblog.com/wp/?p=6141> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[111] ibid.

[112] UK Parliament, Hansard, Commons: 12 Nov 1956, 'Bahrain (Committee of National Union) Volume 560: debated on Monday 12 November 1956' <https://hansard.parliament.uk/%E2%80%8CCommons/1956-11-12/debates/511eadd6-52bd-

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Government swiftly paved the way for the deportations by issuing Orders in Council on 19 December 1956,[113] before the Bahraini court had even delivered its verdict, which enabled the legal exile of key opposition figures to St. Helena.[114] The first Order applied the Colonial Prisoners Removal Act 1869 to Bahrain, which is 'an Act for authorizing the Removal of Prisoners from one Colony to another for the purposes of Punishment'.[115] The second Order, officially known as the Prisoners Removal (Bahrain and St. Helena) Order 1956, was deemed as 'urgently required' to grant Bahrain's ruler the power to transfer prisoners to St. Helena 'if sentenced to imprisonment'.[116]

Although British officials portrayed the expulsions as a decision made solely by Bahrain's leadership, declassified Foreign Office records reveal that London not only approved the move but also provided legal justification and logistical assistance, including the deployment of a Royal Navy frigate to carry out the deportations.[117] Criticism in the House of Commons was directed against the British government for its part in orchestrating the exile behind the scenes, as Member of Parliament William Warbey argued that the entire trial was 'cooked up in advance' with British approval.[118] Moreover, reports indicate that Bahrain's British Advisor, Sir Charles Belgrave,[119] had drafted deportation plans even before the trial began, reinforcing the notion that the entire procedure was prearranged.[120] Ultimately, the repression and forced exile were part of Britain's broader strategy to deactivate the national movement in Bahrain, suppress freedom of expression and maintain its rule, proving that the expulsions were not merely a local initiative but an operation sanctioned at the highest levels in London.[121]

These 1950s repressive measures ignited a more focused uprising in the next decade. Known as the 1965 *intifada* (uprising), the Arab nationalists in Bahrain announced a list of political and legislative demands. These were: to begin talks with the British aimed at gaining independence and closing their military installations; to establish a National Assembly; to liberate political prisoners imprisoned since 1956; to enable political exiles to return; to restore all those made redundant; to authorise trade union activity; and to ensure press freedom.[122]

4589-96bf-a274cce1f6e7/Bahrein(CommitteeOfNationalUnion)#:~:text=Bahrein%20Government%20informed%20the%20British,for%20greater%20participation%20in%20the> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[113]Warbey revealed that 'on 19th December, two Orders in Council were rushed through… on one day'. See UK Parliament, Hansard, Commons: 7 Mar 1957, Commons Chambers, Orders of the Day, 'Bahraini prisoners, St Helena, Volume 566: debated on Thursday 7 March 1957', <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1957-03-07/debates/0e29861a-5f79-44d1-8821-130607249eb0/BahrainiPrisonersStHelena#:~:text=At%20the%20moment%2C%20three%20citizens,time%20when%20their%20sentences%20expire> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[114]ibid.

[115]Colonial Prisoners Removal Act 1869 (32 & 33 Vict c 10).

[116]UK Parliament, Hansard, Commons: 20 Dec 1960, Written Answers, St Helena, 'Bahraini Prisoners, Volume 632: debated on Tuesday 20 December 1960' <https://hansard.parliament.uk/%E2%80%8CCommons/1960-12-20/debates/2d9e80dd-6a6a-4539-98bd-c0d9f52ea52c/BahrainiPrisoners#:~:text=The%20St,be%20arriving%20in%20their%20country> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[117]'Bahraini prisoners, St Helena, Volume 566: debated on Thursday 7 March 1957' (n 119).

[118]ibid.

[119]Despite the suppression of the national movement in Bahrain in this manner, it succeeded in overthrowing Advisor Belgrave at the beginning of 1957. The British government saw his dismissal as a necessary sacrifice to appease the movement and replaced his position with a new one, the 'Secretary of the Government of Bahrain' which was assigned to 'Mr. Smith' with nearly the same powers, although his role appeared to be formally limited in authority. Alabbas (n 113).

[120]UK Parliament, Hansard, Commons: 25 Jan 1957, Written Answers, Ministry of Defence, 'Bahrain (Trials) Volume 563: debated on Friday 25 January 1957', <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1957-01-25/debates/3b5b99b6-819d-45f0-abc5-6cd8e4e7122d/Bahrain(Trials)#:~:text=Sir%20Charles%20Belgrave%2C%20the%20Adviser,things%2C%20of%20plotting%20his%20assassination> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[121]'Bahraini prisoners, St Helena, Volume 566: debated on Thursday 7 March 1957' (n 119).

[122]Al-Mdaires (n 101) 5.

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The *intifada* began when the Bahrain Petroleum Company (which was American owned but controlled by British local colonial authorities),[123] decided to make redundant 450 Bahraini employees.[124] These workers were the first batch out of the 1,500 workers in total the company decided to lay off to replace them with modern machines capable of enhanced productivity.[125] This decision was purely of an administrative nature and was certainly dictated by the fervent political atmosphere prevailing in Bahrain at the time. This political atmosphere ignited a populist uprising that became a major milestone in Bahrain's political movements. The uprising occurred against all odds, as the country was subjected to strict security control from the British authorities, who sought to stifle local nationalists in order to maintain influence. British security forces responded with unprecedented brutality, using extreme measures to crush the movement. The crackdown resulted in numerous injuries and around thirteen deaths.[126] Among those killed were two individuals from Sitra belonging to the Sarhan family, as well as two from Muharraq, Abdullah Al-Ghanem and Abdullah BuNudah.[127] Faisal Al-Qassab also lost his life in Manama.[128] The fact that the uprising persisted in the face of such harsh suppression serves as testament to the robustness of the Arab nationalist movement in Bahrain. This argument is also underpinned by the remarks made by Ali Rabia, a Bahraini activist who witnessed the 1965 *intifada*:

> I can clearly remember the loud demonstrations that filled the streets of Muharraq, Manama, and most of the villages of Bahrain. They were led by political forces with the participation of students. In this regard, we do not forget that the Bahraini street was a national street influenced by Nasserism as a result of the strong Nasserist nationalist tide. Despite the absence of a trade union in Bapco, the trade union awareness was strongly present among the workers, and this created a state of determination among them to force the company to accept the demands they put forward.[129]

Just like their Qatari counterparts, the Bahraini social movements drew inspiration from Arab nationalist scholarship and ideology. Although relatively short-lived, they were hardly static. Their claims at the time were radical in their content and to some degree were more progressive than social claims in Europe. It should also be remembered that unlike other Gulf states, Bahrain is home to a large Shi'ite population. The next section explores another prominent social movement, perhaps the best structured, that of Kuwait.

Kuwait's enchantment with Nasserite pan-Arabism and its growth of social movements

Just like their Qatari counterparts, the Kuwaitis established Arab nationalist cultural groups underpinned by surreptitious nationalist goals. In an attempt to conceal their political activities, the honorary presidency of each club was assigned to a member of the ruling family. By 1956, there were about seventeen clubs, the most prominent of which were the Teachers' Club, the Graduates' Club, the Al-Jazeera Club, the Al-Sahel Cultural Club, and the National Cultural Club headed by Doctor Ahmed Al-Khatib.[130] The membership of the National Cultural Club, which was founded in 1953, was not only available to Kuwaitis but also to Arabs in general. Two years later, the club

[123] Alabbas (n 113).

[124] Tamam Abu Safi, 'Arbeen am ala intifadat March 1965… kayf tabdo fe ayon ha'wla?' [Forty years since the March 1965 uprising… How does it look today in the eyes of those?] Alwasat (4 Mar 2005) <https://www.alwasatnews.com/news/452211.html > accessed 8 Mar 2026>.

[125] ibid.

[126] ibid.

[127] ibid.

[128] ibid.

[129] ibid.

[130] Bader Nasser Al-Mutairi, 'Alkuwait fe ahd Abdulla Al-Salem (1950-1965): Bretanya wa Al-Sabah wal nift' [Kuwait during the era of Abdullah Al-Salem (1950-1965): Britain, the Sabah family and oil] Aljarida (9 September 2020) <https://

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established the *Aleman* (Echo of Faith) magazine that published the ideas of the Arab nationalist movement.[131] Some members of these clubs supported the idea of Kuwait uniting with Iraq, seeing it as part of the broader Arab nationalist movement and drawing parallels to the union between Egypt and Syria under the United Arab Republic.

To facilitate the cooperation between these various clubs, Kuwaiti Arab nationalists formed the Kuwaiti Clubs Committee. This Committee organised demonstrations against the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in 1956 (also known as the Suez Crisis). On 2 November 1956, the Committee distributed leaflets condemning the British conduct, calling for strikes and a mass meeting.[132] However, the police responded with distributing notices banning the proposed demonstrations, making it clear that authorities intended to suppress nationalist activities.

Despite the ban, several hundred Kuwaiti demonstrators attempted to assemble at the Grand Souk Mosque, leading to violent clashes with British security forces that lasted nearly two hours in the heart of Kuwait City.[133] British police officers resorted to force to disperse the protestors, while groups of young demonstrators roamed the streets, throwing stones indiscriminately, at one point even threatening to invade the British Political Agency building.[134] The ruler of Kuwait, Abdullah Al-Mubarak, was a known supporter of the British, and reassured the British Political Agent that British interests in Kuwait would be safeguarded.[135]

Due to their economic and social structure, Bahrain and Kuwait naturally had more 'cultural' organisations to support the Arab nationalist movement. A chart produced by Mufid Alzaidi, a scholar who wrote a book about the various ideologies in the Gulf, illustrates this point.[136] In his book, he presents statistics of cultural associations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia from the 1920s until the 1970s. The table shows that Bahrain had a total of nineteen associations, and Kuwait seventeen. In Saudi Arabia, by contrast, only five associations appeared in the span of five decades.[137] According to Alzaidi, Bahrain was a pioneer in establishing these clubs.[138] He also observes that in Kuwait and Bahrain the activity of feminist groups increased in the 1960s, which is consistent with Arab nationalism's progressive agenda.[139] This was a result of the increased number of women joining feminist groups, the spread of modern education among girls, and the promotion of women's rights and liberation through Arab intellectual channels. The following subsection explores the so-called Cairo Charter, which constitutes a significant attempt by Arab leaders to put in motion the ideals and claims of social movements at the time.

From the Cairo Charter to social movements with a parliamentary role

The first act of Arab nationalism in the Kuwaiti National Assembly is a testament to its robustness. In 1963, following three rounds of discussions held by Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the Cairo

www.aljarida.com/articles/1599581477132914800> accessed 8 Mar 2026; 'Kuwait Alsitinat.. Lmatha?' [1960s Kuwait.. Why?] Alqabas (3 May 2006)<https://alqabas.com/article/193405> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[131] Al-Mutairi (n 130).

[132] Elie Podeh, 'To Unite or Not to Unite: That Is Not the Question: The 1963 Tripartite Unity Talks Reassessed' (2003) 39 Middle Eastern Studies 151 (Nasser's political campaign has no doubt been criticized depending on which side of the spectrum one perceives it. In this article, Podeh explores how the 1963 Tripartite Unity Talks may not have been about Arab unity at all but only reinforcing Nasser's image as the undoubted Arab leader).

[133] Al-Mutairi (n 130).

[134] ibid 133.

[135] ibid 133.

[136] Mufid Alzaidi, *Altayrat Alfikrya fe Alkhalij Alarabi 1938-1971* [The Intellectual Trends in the Arabian Gulf 1938-1971] (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2020) 77.

[137] ibid 80-82.

[138] ibid.

[139] ibid.

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Charter was adopted.[140] The Cairo Charter declared the determination to form a federal union with the same name as the defunct Egyptian-Syrian union of 1958: the United Arab Republic.[141] The 1963 Unity Talks resulted in Arab nationalist candidates raising demands in the Kuwaiti National Assembly only a few weeks after its opening.[142] On 8 April 1963, the twelve-man entity affiliated with the Kuwaiti Arab Nationalist Movement bloc submitted a parliamentary petition endorsing the recently declared United Arab Republic (UAR) of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq and asking Kuwait to express its intention to join a federation of all four nations as soon as possible.[143] From the Arab Nationalists' perspective, the participation of Kuwait in the Union required the termination of the mutual assistance agreement with Britain concluded at the time of the declaration of independence.[144] The termination of this legal instrument and the accession of Kuwait to the Arab Union represented the first activities of Arab nationalist members in the Kuwaiti National Assembly.

The series of events that followed this episode are no less thorny. A year later, the 1964/65 cabinet crisis would count as a victory for Arab nationalists. Wealthy merchants in Kuwait felt that their interests were being undermined through the affiliation of twelve members of parliament with the organised and outspoken Kuwaiti Arab Nationalist Movement. They believed that such affiliation impacted on how the government articulated its foreign policy. These twelve members of parliament promoted the Nasserist type of Arab nationalism, which was viewed by the wealthy merchants as detrimental to their commercial interests. As a response, Thunayan Al-Ghanim, who represented the affluent merchants unwilling to offer support to Nasserist Arab nationalism, and four other business confidantes were convinced to join the Parliament by the prominent merchant and speaker of the Assembly, Abdul-Aziz Al-Sagr.[145] This was engineered as a way of undermining the influence of Arab nationalists, and outnumbering them, in the National Assembly. The majority of Arab nationalists in the Assembly saw this as political and commercial cronyism, and they opposed the senior merchants' candidacy by using the constitutional ban of pursuing business interests while in parliament.[146] This initiative by Abdul-Aziz Al-Sagr gave birth to the 1964/65 cabinet crisis, in which the less wealthy merchants in the parliament mobilised against a proposed cabinet that contained a number of senior merchants keen to counteract the power of Kuwaiti Arab nationalists.[147]

For more than a month, members of the national assembly stood in the way of the formation of a new cabinet in the government. As a result, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salim came under pressure from

[140]The Cairo Charter included these points: '(1) The three states will form a federation called the United Arab Republic, with Cairo as its capital. A third star will be added on to the two-star Egyptian flag of the old union. (2) The federal constitution and the election of the president of the union (presumably Abd al-Nasir) will be ratified in a referendum within a period of not more than five months. (3) The federal constitutional institutions will acquire full legality after a transitional period not exceeding 20 months, which will allow time to integrate the federal functions and establish the necessary federal and regional institutions to implement the constitution. (4) Federal prerogatives will cover foreign affairs, defense and national security, treasury and finance, economy, information, culture and education, justice, communications and other miscellaneous affairs. A presidential council composed of an equal number of members from each of the states will exercise certain responsibilities. The president, however, will have wide powers, such as heading the armed forces, proposing and vetoing laws, and appointing and dismissing cabinet ministers, army officers, federal judges and other senior officials' (see Podeh (n 135) 152-153).

[141]ibid 150.

[142]Neil Patrick, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy (1961-1977): Non-Alignment, Ideology and the Pursuit of Security* (Ph.D. thesis, University of London 2006) 38.

[143]ibid 39-42.

[144]Salah Al-Akkad, *Altayarat Alsiyasiya fe Alkhalij Alarabi* [Political Trends in the Arabian Gulf] (The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop 1993) 252.

[145]See Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge University Press 1990).

[146]Patrick (n 145) 232.

[147]ibid 35.

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the ruling family to dissolve the Assembly or, at the very least, exercise his constitutional right to suspend it until new elections were scheduled.[148] Abdullah Salim, however, recognised the need to ensure that the various political and ideological viewpoints should, to the greatest extent possible, be managed by consensus rather than totalitarianism.[149] The way Sheikh Abdulla responded to this crisis demonstrates how the Kuwaiti government followed a less aggressive and less repressive approach to Arab nationalists. The eventual triumph of the less influential merchants and Arab nationalists at the expense of the wealthy merchants highlights the robustness of Arab nationalist mobilisation in Kuwait.[150] Al-Sagr, who plotted against the Arab nationalists, was forced to resign as the speaker of parliament. He was replaced by pro-Arab nationalists and the prominent advocate of the 'lesser merchants', Saoud Abdul-Razzaq.[151] In short, the cabinet crisis resulted in the wealthy merchants' growing isolation from official political activity.

Sheikh Abdulla's brother, Sheikh Sabah, assumed power in Kuwait in November 1965. Compared to his predecessor, the new ruler, along with his cousin and deputy ruler Sheikh Jaber, followed a more restrictive policy to Arab nationalists in the legislative branch. The laws he passed a year after assuming power caused unrest among Arab nationalist candidates in the National Assembly. On 7 December 1965, National Assembly representatives Ahmed Al-Khatib, Abdul Razzaq Al-Khalid, Sami Ahmed Al-Manis, Ali Al-Omar, Rashid Saleh Al-Tawhid, Yaqoub Al-Humaidhi, Jassim Al-Qutami and Suleiman Al-Mutawa submitted their resignations due to the government passing laws that restricted freedoms.[152]

In another incident, Sheikh Sabah had begun his era by trying to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the conflict over Yemen, as a continuation of Kuwait's mediation policies.[153] During the mediation, Sheikh Sabah visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia and some Gulf countries. He returned with the belief that if the Arab nationalists in Kuwait forced him to choose a side (ie, Egypt or Saudi Arabia), then it would be in his interest to choose the side of Saudi Arabia.[154] As Sheikh Sabah saw that the pressure to choose Egypt increased from the Arab nationalists' representatives in the Assembly, he implemented various repressive measures against them. The main measure occurred insidiously with the National Assembly's second round of elections in January 1967. Despite the wide resonance of Arab nationalism among Kuwaiti nationals – which suggested that they would have voted for Arab nationalist representatives – the election results shocked observers and candidates alike. Most Arab nationalist candidates in the National Assembly lost their positions, including Al-Khatib.[155] As a result, Arab nationalist supporters accused the government of rigging the election. This unrest culminated in the resignation of some deputies in protest of these allegations.[156]

[148] ibid 232.

[149] ibid.

[150] ibid 35 ('The Kuwaiti Arab nationalists in the Parliament had positioned themselves throughout the crisis as something close to "His Highness's loyal opposition," stressing the necessity of having a functioning government that they could subsequently oppose'.)

[151] ibid.

[152] 'Hadath fe mth Hatha Alyoum fe Alkuwait' [Happened on this day in Kuwait] (Kuwait News Agency, 7 Dec 2008) <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=1958814&language=ar> accessed 8 Mar 2026; For more details on the candidates' positions, see the tables on the official website of the National Assembly: <https://kuwaitpolitics.org/pg4.htm> accessed 8 Mar 2026.

[153] Al-Akkad (n 147) 258.

[154] ibid 260-63.

[155] ibid.

[156] ibid 263.

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The *Al-Tali'ah* newspaper,[157] the journal of Kuwaiti Arab nationalists,[158] exposed the violations of the 1967 elections.[159] They wrote articles claiming fraud in the voting procedure to undermine Arab nationalists.[160] This prompted Sheikh Sabah to implement his second measure of repression, which was to terminate the *Al-Tali'ah* newspaper. At the same time, Sheikh Sabah supported the *Al-Rai Al-A'am* newspaper, which was owned by the conservative opponent of Arab nationalists, Abdul Aziz Al-Masaeed, who supported Saudi Arabia against Egypt.[161] Moreover, all Arab nationalist clubs were shut down.[162] These clubs and the press had all been important parts of Kuwaiti public life and formed part of what distinguished Kuwait from other Gulf nations.[163]

In addition to these domestic measures, specific international circumstances made it easier for the Kuwaiti government to repress Arab nationalism. The Yemeni civil war, the conflict over Palestine,[164] and to some extent the Arab nationalist uprising in Bahrain, all served to highlight how fragmented the Arab world had become. As a result, Kuwait had more control over local Arab nationalists and felt less need to continuously draw attention to pan-Arab concerns.[165] The Deputy Emir, Sheikh Jaber, initiated a 'Kuwait First' campaign in 1966, partly as a reaction to Baghdad's aspirations over Kuwait, and to protect Kuwaiti interests domestically and internationally, as mentioned in the formal Amiri speech.[166] Senior members in the ruling family supported this initiative as they believed that Arab nationalists had 'gone too far'.[167]

It is important to note that these government repressions were not easy to implement. The Kuwaiti government relied on a certain set of circumstances that legitimised or concealed their repressive actions, particularly voting fraud as well as state-nationalist campaigns like 'Kuwait First'. In addition to these domestic circumstances, international factors, as mentioned above, assisted the authorities in repressing the Arab nationalist activities. The Kuwaiti government wanted to 'assert greater authority' following the growing influence of Arab nationalist in the National Assembly.[168] With the results of the second round of elections in 1967, the Arab nationalist group in the National Assembly suffered a major defeat. The undermining of Arab nationalists in the Parliament made it easier for the authorities to introduce a series of restrictions to expel Egyptian and Palestinian Nasserists from the country and clamp down the relative freedom of the press and Arab nationalist 'cultural' organisations.[169]

[157] Abdallah Al-Niyabri narrates in an article the story of the establishment of the *Al-Talia* newspaper. He describes it as a national project that was issued in the name of the late Abd al-Razzaq Khaled al-Zaid al-Khalid, on behalf of the 'Al-Talia Group' including Doctor Ahmed Al-Khatib, Jassim Al-Qatami, Abdul-Razzaq Al-Khalid, Suleiman Al-Haddad, Suleiman Al-Mutawa, Rashid Al-Tawhid, Sami Al-Manis, and Ali Abdul-Rahman Al-Omar. See Hamza Al-Alian & Khalid Al-Hutab, 'Al-Khatib le Abdulla Al-Salim: Zulumna.. Wa Altaliah tobaa' Bilmazad' [Al-Khatib to Abdulla Al-Salim: we were wronged.. And the Tali'ah is being auctioned] Alqabas (27 Oc 2018), ≤https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=1958814&language=ar≥ accessed 8 Mar 2026. These names mentioned above are all Arab nationalists. The most notables are Jassim Al-Qutami, who was the leader of the Arab nationalist movement in Kuwait during Nasser's tenure, while Ahmad Al-Khatib was the deputy leader, see Patrick (n 99) 235. These two, along with all the names mentioned, were active members of the National Assembly representing the Arab nationalist bloc.

[158] Patrick (n 145) 44.

[159] Al-Akkad (n 147) 259.

[160] Patrick (n 145) 44.

[161] Al-Akkad (n 147) 270-273.

[162] Patrick (n 145) 35.

[163] ibid.

[164] The divisions over the Palestinian cause centered on whether Kuwait should fully embrace Nasser's pan-Arab stance, which demanded unwavering support for Palestine, or take a more pragmatic approach that safeguarded its sovereignty and regional stability.

[165] ibid 44.

[166] ibid.

[167] ibid.

[168] ibid 35.

[169] ibid.

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It is clear that social movements in Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait were the most vociferous and demanding in the Arabian Gulf. This is in contrast to their Saudi counterparts, albeit this is easily explained as the latter were not under British or another foreign rule. Naturally, the Saudi monarchy was keen to quell any such movement, irrespective of its demands and claims. The following section provides a snapshot of social movements in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in order to highlight their differences with those in their Gulf neighbours.

The limited Saudi experimentation with social movements

Just like in Bahrain, several segments of the Saudi society engaged with Nasserist ideology. Unlike in Bahrain (and Kuwait), very few organisations operated in Saudi Arabia, partly because it was not under direct British rule.[170] However, the broader wave of anti-British nationalist resistance in the Gulf likely shaped the perspectives of Saudi dissidents. While nationalist movements in Bahrain and Kuwait actively resisted British rule, Saudi activists framed their opposition to the monarchy as part of the larger anti-colonial struggle, drawing on the ideological influence from their neighbours.

It may well be argued that most Saudi Arab nationalist organisations functioned abroad because they were persecuted by the highly authoritarian and repressive Saudi regime. In addition to the country's autocratic leadership, the lack of precedence for political opposition in the country weakened all Arab nationalist movements. While political opposition existed since the beginning of the twentieth century in Kuwait and Bahrain, political opposition was a recent phenomenon in Saudi Arabia during Nasser's tenure. And when opposition occurred, repression was severe.[171] The Saudi government's harsh response to Arab nationalist demonstrators in 1956 echoed the British-supported crackdowns in Bahrain, strengthening the belief among opposition groups that the Al-Saud monarchy was actively aiding the suppression of nationalist aspirations. The repressive measures encouraged many opposition groups to operate outside of the Kingdom.[172] The remaining activists, and some of those who were freed after the persecution of 1956, acted covertly or in exile.[173] Because of the intense repression there was little likelihood of immediate success.[174]

Furthermore, the Saudi government's repressive and totalitarian direction made it difficult for illegal opposition organisations to survive, while the Kingdom's organised opposition was unable to achieve any victories.[175] Forty young officers were detained in December 1962 for plotting a coup.[176] Many similar instances of dissent occurred, but they did not create a threat to the Al-Saud legitimacy in the Kingdom.[177] As Alexei Vassiliev puts it,

[170]A chart produced by Mufid Alzaidi, a scholar who wrote a book about different ideologies in the Gulf, is relevant to this point. In his book, he presents statistics of political organisations and cultural associations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia from the twenties until the seventies. The table shows that Bahrain had a total of nineteen associations, compared to seventeen associations in Kuwait. In Saudi Arabia, only five associations appeared in the span of five decades. See Mufid Alzaidi, *Altayrat Alfikrya fe Alkhalij Alarabi 1938-1971* [The Intellectual Trends in the Arabian Gulf 1938-1971] (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2020) 77.

[171]Omar Hisham Al-Shihabi, *Alkhalij bain Althabt wa Almutahawwel* [The Gulf between Permanence and Change] (Al-Maaref Forum 2014) 16.

[172]Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge University Press 2014) 81 (discussing the complexity of Saudi society, despite attempts by the Kingdom to depict itself as composed fully of a Sunni population and as not having any internal dissent).

[173]ibid 81-83.

[174]ibid.

[175]Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (Saqi 2013) 310 (one of the key studies on the modern political history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia).

[176]ibid 312.

[177]ibid 311.

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> until 1967, the Saudi regime faced no serious danger from the illegal opposition… Among the opposition organizations, only the Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula and the National Liberation Front remained viable in 1966-67.[178]

However, the influence of nationalist uprisings in British-controlled Gulf states can also be seen in the ideological framing of Saudi opposition movements. While the Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula was founded in Egypt, it later moved from Cairo to Sanaa after the Yemeni revolution as the geographical proximity would give them an advantage.[179] With Nasir Al-Said's assistance, they established a supreme command for effective operations in Saudi Arabia.[180] Another Saudi opposition organisation that operated in Egypt was the Federation of the Sons of the Arabian Peninsula.[181] Presenting itself as an Arab nationalist organisation, members of the Federation spoke on the Voice of Arabs, and demanded that the Saudi monarchy be abolished and that a national assembly be established to represent all segments of society.[182]

The second opposition organisation that Alexei Vassiliev mentioned, the Arab National Liberation Front, operated in Lebanon.[183] They presented their opinions in a column named 'The Voice of the Front' in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Kifah*.[184] Its demands included:

> a constitutional, democratic form of government and elected organs of government; freedom of thought, speech and assembly; the right to set up political organizations and trade unions; the right to strike and hold demonstrations; a radical restructuring of the government machinery; the development of education, the elimination of illiteracy and the introduction of education for girls, based on equality with males…[185]

The influence of British-backed repression in the Gulf is evident in the varying strength of nationalist movements across the region. In British-controlled states like Bahrain, opposition groups united around a common anti-colonial cause, directing their resistance against an external authority. This provided Bahraini and Kuwaiti nationalists with a strong ideological foundation and a clearly defined enemy: British rule. In contrast, Saudi dissidents did not share this dynamic, as their struggle was not directed against a foreign occupier but their own monarchy. Talal Al-Saud, the general secretary of the Arab National Liberation Front, initially championed pan-Arabist ideals but abandoned the movement after a dispute with Nasser. After the disagreement, Talal Al-Saud, and some of his adherents, left the Arab National Liberation Front in August 1963.[186] Talal, who was a prominent member of the opposition's Free Princes movement, changed his political direction.[187] His shift illustrates the fragility of Saudi opposition efforts, particularly in contrast to the more established nationalist movements in British-controlled Gulf states. While Bahraini activists could rally around anti-colonial sentiment to strengthen their cause and retain their commitment even under British repression, Saudi dissidents were more vulnerable to ideological shifts and political realignments.

After the ideological shift, Talal and The Free Princes' relationship with Nasser deteriorated.[188] In a statement made in Beirut, his usual place of operations, Talal said that he and other princes would

[178] ibid.
[179] ibid 310.
[180] The Editors, 'The Arabian Peninsula Opposition Movements' (Middle East Report, Feb 1985) <https://merip.org/1985/02/the-arabian-peninsula-opposition-movements/> accessed 8 Mar 2026.
[181] Vassiliev (n 178) 315-318.
[182] ibid.
[183] ibid.
[184] ibid.
[185] See Al-Abdulla Y, *Tarik Alta'alem Fe Alkhalej Alarabi 1913-1971* [History of Education in the Arabian Gulf 1913-1971] (Renoda M Printing Press 2009) 2-9.
[186] Vassiliev (n 178) 318-321.
[187] ibid.
[188] ibid.

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try to reach a deal with King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal. Talal hinted at his dissatisfaction with Egypt in February 1964, whereupon he declared that his criticism of the Saudi government's domestic and international policies was 'entirely wrong'.[189] He expressed his admiration for Faisal's political and constitutional reforms and pledged to 'behave properly' in the future.[190] In late February of that year, Talal went back to Riyadh; his brothers had already moved there a month earlier.[191] The Free Princes movement came to an end, and it was no longer spoken about their political endeavours.

The development of Saudi nationalist movements reflects how opposition in the Gulf was shaped by reference to the experience of direct colonial rule. In British-controlled Bahrain and Kuwait, nationalist resistance remained robust, while in Saudi Arabia, the absence of a colonial enemy meant dissidents lacked a common cause to unite them. Many operated from exile and were more vulnerable to internal divisions. The Saudi monarchy effectively dismantled opposition groups and relied on domestic repression rather than foreign intervention to maintain control. Unlike Bahrain, where nationalist activism remained active well into the 1970s, Saudi opposition never grew into a lasting threat. This approach of suppression and co-optation continued to define how the Saudi state handled political dissent in the years that followed.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that Arab nationalism played a dominant role in fostering and achieving the impetus for self-determination in the Arabian Gulf. Arab nationalism dominated the popular movements of Gulf territories, chiefly from the mid-1930s onwards, and following the victorious rise of Nasser. The creation of social and cultural movements through which Arab nationalism was able to flourish represents the peak of this ideology, at least in the Gulf. However, one must take account of the delicate balance Gulf local leaders had to tread with the British, initially in order to remain free from Ottoman subjugation, and later to avoid their enclosure within the League of Nations mandate system.[192] Even after the end of World War II, small sheikhdoms had to survive in a largely hostile global landscape determined by the colonial powers' violent struggle to retain their influence. In the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when Empires were disintegrating, Arab social movements in the Gulf put forward with force the right of Arab people to dignity and self-determination under the banner of Arab nationalism. Demand for free and fair elections, some degree of local and popular representation in parliamentary-style assemblies, and worker rights might seem to Western audiences as being out of place in contemporary Gulf politics and their constitutional arrangements. However, they are inextricably linked to the social contract prevalent in the Middle East, and particularly the Gulf, whereby enlightened monarchs go hand-in-hand with civil liberties that are particular to the region.[193]

The legacy of Arab nationalism is manifest in all Gulf constitutions.[194] There was little doubt that this would be case, despite their current form of government, given the catalytic nature of this ideology in shaping a pan-Arab political ideology. Moreover, the people of the Gulf owe their political existence and self-determination to this unique force that shaped their region and ultimately

[189] ibid.
[190] ibid.
[191] ibid.
[192] See Ilias Bantekas & Moza Al Thani, 'Self-Determination and Territorial Agreements in the Middle East: From the Ottomans to Colonial Rule' (2024) 39 Emory International Law Review 77.
[193] It is instructive that in 2021 Qatar opened the way to all persons the right to be elected to its Shura Council. Ali Bakeer, 'Reflections on the First Shura Council Elections in Qatar', Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (22 Dec 2021) <https://www.freiheit.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/reflections-first-shura-council-elections-qatar> accessed 8 Mar 2026. See also Ilias Bantekas, 'Qatar's Constitutional Reforms of 2024' in Richard Albert & Luis R Barroso (eds), *International Review of Constitutional Reform* (University of Texas 2025).
[194] Rachel M Scott, *Recasting Islamic Law* (Cornell University Press 2021) 66.

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contributed to the demise of British rule. It is no wonder, therefore, that article 5(b) of the Qatari Constitution of 1972 states in emphatic terms that:

> The State believes that the union of Arab countries in the region is a fateful need dictated by the common higher Arab interests in the region in special, and in the grand Arab homeland in general. The State shall devote all possible efforts to support such union and work to achieve it in the most appropriate image gathering between it and those sister countries which has strongest ties, most powerful and most originality with them.[195]

In equal measure, the Kuwaiti Constitution reserves specific reverence for 'Arab nationalism' in the following terms:

> In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful; We, Abdallah Al Salem Al Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait, Desirous of fulfilling all of the exigencies of democratic rule in our beloved homeland; Confident in the role this Nation can play in the wake of Arab nationalism, of service to world peace and of civilization.[196]

The first article of the Kuwaiti constitution conveys the Arabist character of the state, as it stipulates that

> 'Kuwait is an Arab, independent, fully sovereign State. There shall be no surrender of its sovereignty nor cession of any part of its territories. The people of Kuwait are part of the Arab Nation'.

As discussed in this article, the fact that Gulf peoples during the era that led to independence laid claim to their Arab identity, should not be viewed as a form of nationalism that is, or was, antithetical to established tenets of international law such as the right to self-determination. Even today, let alone fifty to seventy years ago, it is legitimate for self-determination claims to be predicated on national and ethnic origin, not only as a basis for the external dimension of self-determination, but also internally.[197] Arab nationalism was a coalescing force, far above religious claims,[198] that was meant to challenge colonial rule which prevented Arabs from exercising self-rule and from enjoying the sort of civil and political rights which they viewed as inherent in their societies. This is a revolutionary idea because the West has generally perceived Arabs as oppressed people with no demands that encompass civil and political rights, and has often claimed that their best political periods were those under foreign control. The literature is generally silent on Arab (and particularly in the Arabian Gulf) struggles for self-determination and constitutional rights.[199] No doubt, it has always been in the interest of colonisers to mute such demands and portray themselves as the only force guaranteeing unity and order. The reality on the ground, as this article has hopefully demonstrated, was different. The constitutional credentials of people in the Gulf have always been very vociferous, and,

[195] Qatari Amended Provisional Constitution of 1972, preamble.

[196] Kuwait 1962 Constitution, preamble.

[197] See recently also *Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965*, ICJ Advisory Opinion [2019] ICJ Rep 2, where the ICJ confirmed that while self-determination is a fundamental human right, there is little support for its application to situations of secession (eg Catalunya, Kosovo), albeit a safety valve is possible where people are grossly oppressed. Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton University Press 2003) 312.

[198] See Fadwa A M Naserat, *Arab Christians and Arab Nationalism* (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2009) 15 (who makes the well-known point that the fathers of Arab nationalism were Christians, chiefly from Syria and Lebanon. There figures are celebrated and honored by Muslim Arabs).

[199] Anthony Anghie, 'Colonialism and the Birth of International Institutions: Sovereignty, Economy and the Mandate System of the League of Nations', (2002) 34 New York University Journal of International Law & Politics 513 (who notes, among other issues, that colonial powers sought to silence the voices of local populations for self-rule, while at the same time exercising divisive politics in order to establish themselves as a unifying force).

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despite their newly found oil wealth and entrenched social contracts, there is no shortage of civil and political rights claims in the present day.[200]

Self-determination struggles are not monolithic, and the content of the claims depends on the history and nature of oppression, as well as its duration. In the European context, such struggles were violent, precisely because people had been oppressed by elites for centuries and the pertinent claims were radical and certainly revolutionary in nature. In the particular context of the Gulf, the concept of long-standing statehood, and the identities associated with it, was itself a recent phenomenon. Thus, by the 1950s, the perception of an Arab consciousness was only just beginning to mature into claims for self-determination. Until then, Arab nationalism had been brewing as a political ideal that had not yet fully formed into a concrete claim for a single statehood, at least universally among Arabs. The struggle against British rule and dominion was the beginning of a broader struggle in the entire Arab world. It certainly demonstrated that Arabs in the Gulf were just beginning to realise their own particular identities as peoples of micro-states – and to have a vision of their polities. What started as a political and ideological movement in the late nineteenth century, ultimately offered the spark that ignited vociferous calls for independence in the aftermath of World War II. It is hoped that this article will assist to some degree in dispelling one of the last Orientalist myths,[201] according to which Arabs are devoid of political aspirations and have no interest in civil and political rights, whether because of their backwardness or their wealth (at least in the Gulf). These depictions not only helped to justify, and reinforce, colonial policies but also forged a myth that lives to the present day.

[200] Eleni Polymenopoulou, 'Human Rights in the Six States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): from Vision to Reality' (2019) International Comparative Policy & Ethics Law Review 929, 969 (examining their constitutional and human rights potential even though national visions are effectively White Papers). See also art 80 Kuwait Constitution (providing for elections in respect of the country's National Assembly); Eleni Polymenopoulou, *Sharia and Human Rights in the Constitutional Framework of Gulf States*, (2024) 46 Human Rights Quarterly 1, 23 (noting that the Kuwaiti constitutional court has issued a series of judgments in sensitive areas that clash with established Islamic values. The Court has found that all these values can and should be reconciled).

[201] Orientalism was a driving force in literature for a long time, which effectively helped build a negative perception of Arabs in the Western psyche. The Orientalism myth was identified and destroyed by the pioneering work of Edward Said, a Christian Palestinian. Said, who in fact coined the term, pointed to the racist and commodified ways in which the West depicted and discussed Eastern/Arab culture. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin 1978).

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