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Dissidents in the Arabian Peninsula

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A Research Paper

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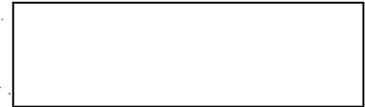
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A Research Paper

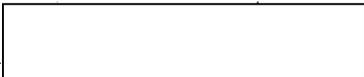
*Research for this report was completed
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This assessment was prepared by [redacted]

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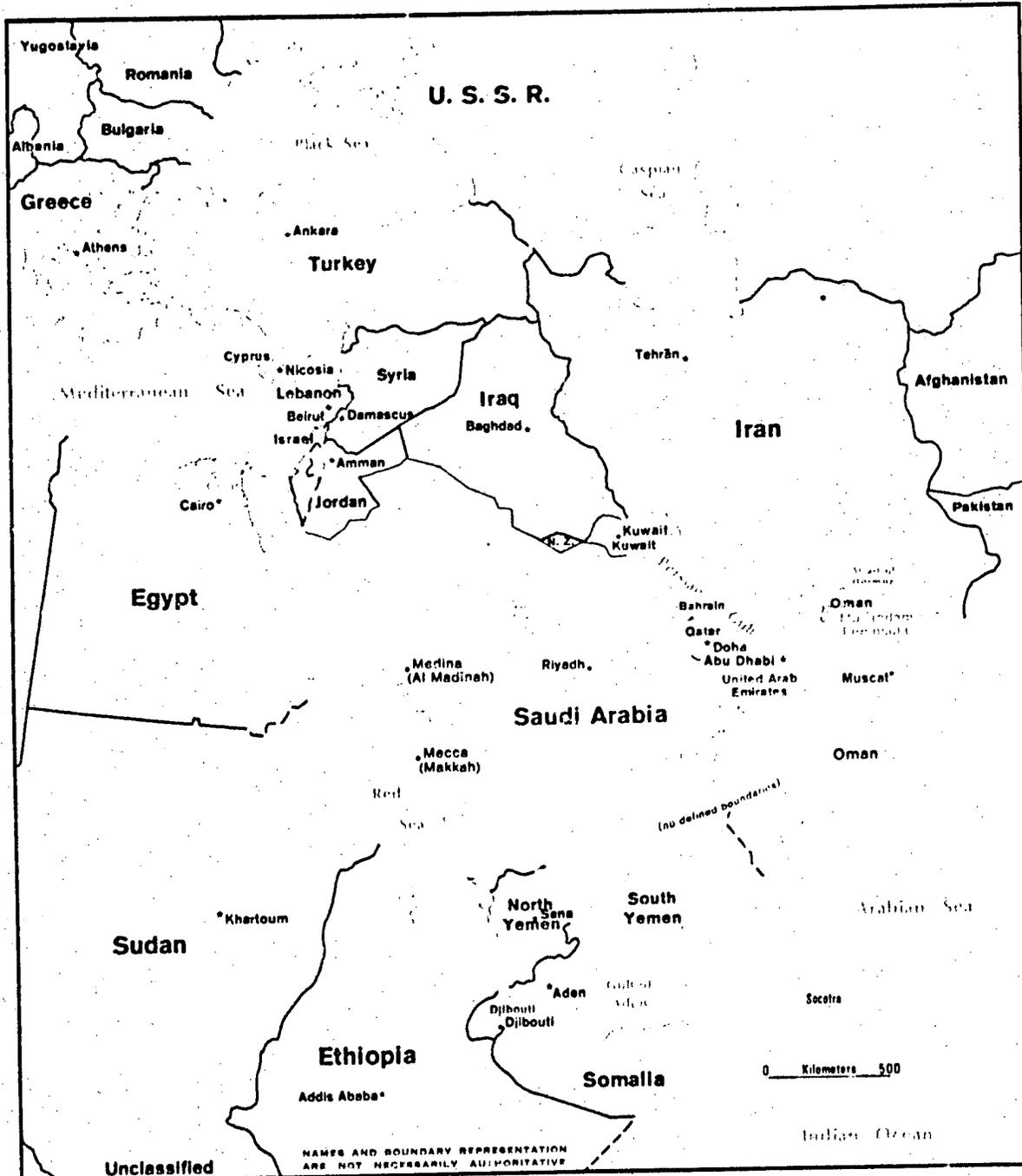
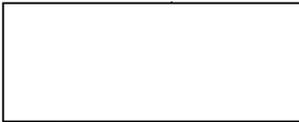
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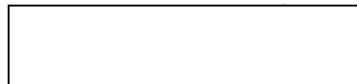
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Dissidents in the Arabian Peninsula (U)

Key Judgments

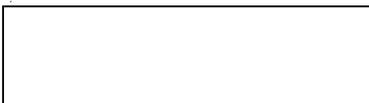
Encouraged by the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, dissidents in the Arabian Peninsula monarchies—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman—are seeking to build their own assets.

Most are beginning from relatively weak positions and at this stage are concentrating on recruitment. Some are also trying to build their subversive capability, with military and financial help from South Yemen and radical Palestinian and Lebanese leftist factions. Leftists in several Peninsula countries are trying to broaden their appeal by adding reforms demanded by Shia leaders to their own demands for political liberalization. The criticisms of existing regimes leveled from left and right are remarkably parallel, particularly on the issue of corruption.

Several constraints limit dissident efforts to expand their organizations. Most dissident groups are headed by exiles who have relatively small bases of support in their own countries. Leftist liberation front groups, which proliferated in the region through the mid-1970s, are particularly affected by a history of inept leadership, government penetration and arrests, membership defections, and institutional rivalries.

The potential threat from religiously based dissident groups now seems greater than any current threat from traditional leftist groups. The extent of Shia unrest is difficult to estimate, and Shia demands vary—leaders harangue the ruling families for ungodliness and corruption, but so far have stopped short of calling for a revolution similar to Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in Iran. Like the leftists, they urge political and economic reforms and release of all political prisoners, but above all they insist on the establishment of an Islamic government based on close observance of religious law and custom. Shia populations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are heavily represented in a variety of organizations, both secular and religious; some Shia leaders are appointees of the Ayatollah Khomeini and have ties to religious figures and militant organizations in Iran.

Conservative Sunni groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood, also urge the overthrow of corrupt, non-Islamic governments and the establishment of a unified Islamic state, but they appear so far to be focusing their activities outside the peninsula.

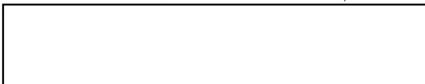


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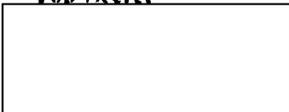
South Yemen, Iraq, Libya, the USSR, and Palestinian factions are giving aid and encouragement to both leftist and religious dissidents, while at the same time they are trying to expand their own bases of operations in the region.

Peninsula leaders anticipate increasingly serious difficulties in light of the challenge posed at Mecca and the attempt by Iranian religious figures to export their revolution. In response, peninsula states will probably move toward closer cooperation on security matters—intelligence exchanges on dissidents, improved military cooperation, and tightened internal security. Each leader will also seek to refurbish his Islamic credentials and will probably support application of Islamic laws previously ignored.



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Dissidents in the Arabian Peninsula (U)

The Iranian revolution has revived the hopes of clandestine dissident factions in the Arabian Peninsula that they too can organize effective opposition to the region's ruling families. Organizations that had been languishing since the end of the Dhofar rebellion in late 1975 are showing signs of life and new interest in forming alliances with ethnic and religious elements once scorned as politically unreliable. At the same time, South Yemen and radical Palestinian factions are encouraging leftist dissidents to escalate their attacks on the regimes while they try to widen their own bases of operations in the peninsula. The main purpose of this study is to describe these organizations rather than to estimate their chances of success or to analyze the vulnerability of various peninsula governments. 

Reporting on the various groups is sketchy, and we cannot confidently measure the capabilities of many. Most of the dissident groups appear to be headed by exiles whose aim is to channel discontent among Shias, students, workers, and civil servants into broadly based opposition movements. Platforms include objectives such as the restoration of representative government, relaxation of repressive security laws, and release of political prisoners. Secondarily, they are trying to rebuild a subversive capability on the peninsula and are seeking military training and financial support from South Yemen and radical Palestinian and Lebanese leftist factions. 

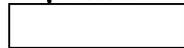
Leftist Groups

A variety of leftist groups have operated in the Arabian Peninsula during the past two decades. Beginning in the late 1960s, dissident organizations multiplied at a dizzying rate, encouraged by the growing strength of the leftist rebellion in Oman's Dhofar Province and by the British announcement in 1968 that it was withdrawing from the small shaykhdoms on the Gulf. Within a few years, however, most of the dissident groups had disappeared. Some had merged to form a

single organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf (PFLOAG).^{*} PFLOAG was intended by South Yemen, its main supporter, to spearhead coordinated attacks on the ruling families of the peninsula states. This strategy failed, and in 1974 in a change of tactics, PFLOAG was dissolved and replaced by several semiautonomous national liberation fronts individually targeted against governments in Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia. 

Other groups were seriously weakened by government penetration and arrests, internal disputes, widespread defections, and inept leadership. Saudi Arabia arrested a large number of dissidents, including disaffected military officers, following coup attempts in 1969 and 1971. Baath Party chapters in Saudi Arabia and the other peninsula states lost both members and credibility by the mid-1970s as they split along Syrian-Iraqi lines. Neither Baathist faction ever posed a serious threat to peninsula regimes. In late 1974 Qatar arrested, dismissed, or deported 137 government officials for their involvement with the PFLOAG, while Bahrain and the UAE uncovered, with Omani assistance, extensive networks of South Yemeni and PFLOAG agents the following year. Communist parties have never won popular support; their tendency to analyze peninsula problems in a European Marxist jargon had little meaning to citizens of the oil-rich states or to the largely expatriate (and easily deportable) work force. Small Saudi and Kuwaiti Communist Parties still exist, but neither is active inside their country. 

^{*} PFLOAG was a combination of several small but diverse groups, all of which had as their objective the overthrow of the Arabian Peninsula monarchies and the elimination of foreign economic and political influence. Groups joining PFLOAG included the Baghdad-backed National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf, the Aden-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf, the Damascus-backed Front for the Liberation of the Eastern Arabian Peninsula, the Kuwaiti-based Popular Revolutionary Movement, and the Arab National Movement, established by Palestinian radical leader George Habbash in Beirut in the late 1940s. 



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Coordination among leftist groups operating in the peninsula has been minimal because of leadership rivalries and institutional jealousies, but this may be changing. Leftists in Kuwait have issued statements in support of Bahraini political prisoners, and most peninsula leftists have talked about establishing links with Shia dissidents and have indicated their support for certain Shia goals. A continuing constraint is the leftists' reluctance to ally themselves organizationally with the highly visible Shia dissidents for fear of exposing their members and organizations to infiltration by state security services and because they believe the Shias would refuse to support leftist political goals.

The Fundamentalists

Two types of religious-political dissident groups have branches in the peninsula--one represents conservative Sunni Muslim interests and predates the Iranian revolution, while the other represents Shia Muslims and is probably supported by Iranian religious figures. Information is fragmentary on both types of organizations, and we know little of their size, influence, or involvement in antigovernment activities. We have no information on the existence of pro-Khomeini Shia organizations prior to the February 1979 Iranian revolution.

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The Muslim Brotherhood is a conservative Sunni organization founded in 1928 by an Egyptian schoolteacher, Hassan al-Banna. The Brotherhood has as its goal the overthrow of all non-Islamic governments and the establishment of a unified Islamic state according to the tenets of the early (Sunni) caliphate, a more equitable sharing of wealth, and use of Islamic law as the sole basis of legislation. It opposes the spread of Western influence in the Arab world. The Brotherhood is most active in Egypt and Syria, but there are chapters in Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE. There is no known chapter in Saudi Arabia, but the Saudis are major financial backers and provide safe haven for Brotherhood leaders exiled from other countries. An offshoot and sometime rival of the Brotherhood, the Islamic Liberation Party (ILP), has chapters in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and possibly the UAE. It was founded in Jordan in the 1950s. [redacted]

succession; moving the capital from Riyadh to Mecca; and removal of Western influences, such as television, radio, and the employment of women. [redacted]

Other peninsula regimes are most concerned over Shia organizations. Encouraged by the fall of the Shah and the establishment in Iran of a near-theocratic government, peninsula Shia leaders are demanding that the Sunni rulers institute political reforms aimed at returning government and society to the path of Islamic fundamentalism. Shia leaders—some claiming anointment by Khomeini—berate the Sunni Arab regimes in mosque sermons and private meetings for ungodliness, and distribute leaflets, cassettes of speeches, and petitions demanding religious and social reforms. [redacted]

[redacted]

The seizure in November of the Great Mosque in Mecca, Islam's holiest shrine, by a religiously motivated dissident group underlines the threat such groups pose to the Saudi regime. Details are sparse, but the group of several hundred well-armed dissidents reportedly was dissatisfied with the royal family's political rule, which they saw as corrupt and illegitimate, and with Wahhabi religious leaders, who they believed had deviated from the pure Islam of the Prophet. Their demands included recognition of their leader as the Mahdi, or messiah; a return to government according to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad; an elective

[redacted]

External Support to Peninsula Dissidents

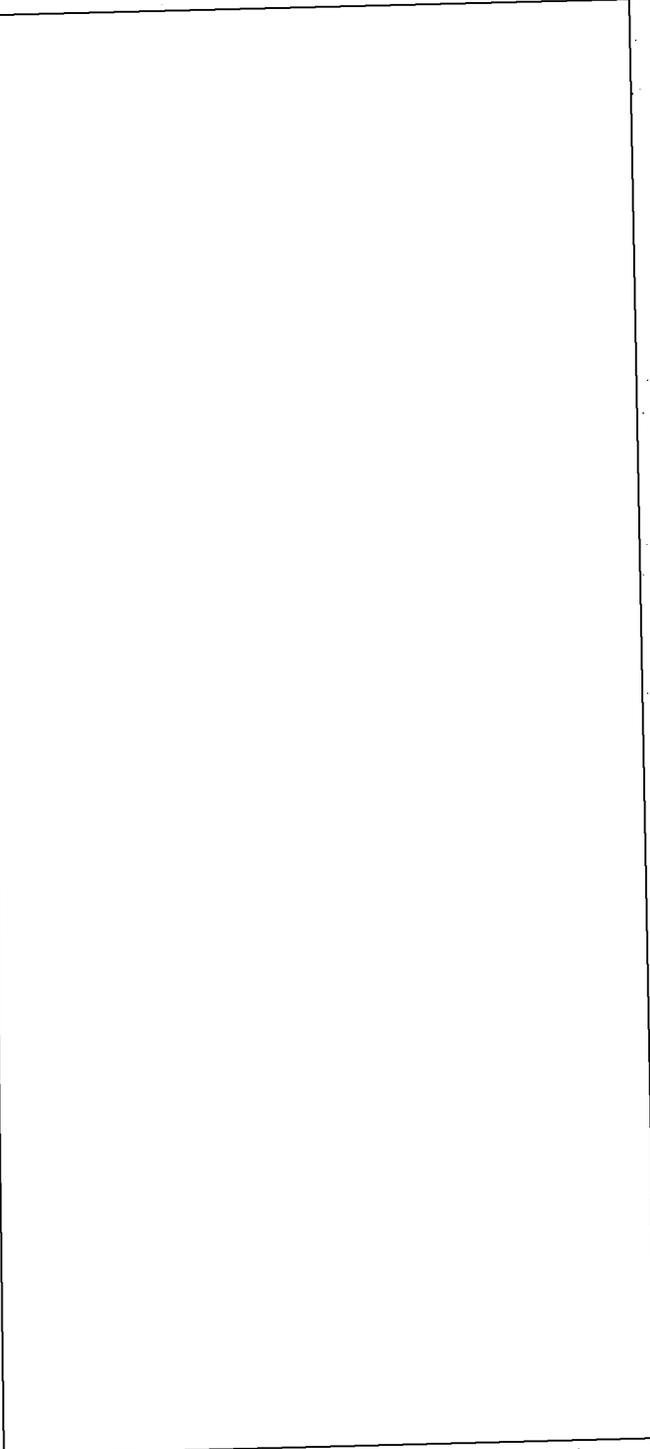
Peninsula dissident organizations—both leftist and fundamentalist—require external support if they are to seriously challenge peninsula rulers. The form of assistance varies—outright military aid and advice to the PFLO; guerrilla training in special camps in Iraq, Libya, and South Yemen; offers of safe haven, passports, propaganda, and use of diplomatic pouches for transfer of weapons, publications, and funds. [redacted]

All the Shia organizations have ties to religious leaders in Iran, but there is no evidence that they have received money or material aid from the Iranian Government. The Shia dissident organizations could, however, provide Tehran or individual religious leaders with a mechanism for regulating the activities of Iranians in the region, channeling funds to Shia dissidents, and pressuring Arab Sunni regimes that Khomeini views with disfavor. [redacted]

Palestinian Support

Palestinian organizations—from the more moderate Fatah through the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) of George Habbash—have long maintained contacts with peninsula leftist dissidents and are now establishing links with the Shias as well. They are also seeking to expand their own organizations in the region. [redacted]

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has had offices in each of the peninsula states since the early 1970s. In each state, it acts primarily as liaison between the substantial Palestinian communities and the government. For the most part, the PLO confines its activities to fundraising and drumming up support for Palestinian causes. Most local office chiefs are selected with regime approval and are more concerned with protecting their links to the ruling families than with challenging the rulers. In several of the states, particularly the UAE, Palestinians have been allowed considerable leeway, and the government has looked the other way while the PLO established training facilities, smuggled arms, and provided safe haven for peninsula dissidents. [redacted]



South Yemen over the years has provided the most extensive support to leftists in the peninsula. It offers training facilities, safe haven, weapons, and passports and is a conduit for Soviet aid. Its revolutionary government has long supported the PFLO, although the levels of aid fluctuate according to the state of Aden's relations with the moderate Arab governments in the peninsula. Aden restricts PFLO activities when prospects for normalizing relations with Oman improve and encourages Omani dissidence when it wants to pressure the Saudis and the Omanis. Aden clandestinely funnels arms and money for other liberation fronts through its Embassies in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In addition, Aden works through Yemeni expatriate communities scattered throughout the peninsula and attempts to infiltrate police, military, and local administrative units. South Yemen's sponsorship of subversion and its links to the USSR serve to intimidate and frighten the peninsula's more conservative rulers.

Outlook

Because of the sketchiness of the information on dissident strength and activity in the Arabian Peninsula, it is difficult to assess the potential threat the organizations pose to the Sunni Arab regimes. For the moment, most of the groups are concentrating their efforts on reorganization and recruitment and taking few risks of exposure. Leftist dissidents are being especially cautious. They have made gestures of support to disaffected Shias, students, and workers and are attempting to present a cooperative image in order to broaden their base of support, but they recognize an inherent contradiction between leftist and Shia Islamic goals. Leftist leaders prefer to wait, believing that time is on their side, that the Iranian situation is inherently unstable, and that the Khomeini-led clerical government will be replaced by leftists who will aid the leftist cause on the peninsula.

The Shias of the peninsula also look to Iran for clues to future developments. Emboldened by the success of the February revolution and impressed by the power of the mullahs, peninsula religious leaders are making a bid

[redacted]

for a political role in the Arab states lining the Gulf. While few of the Shia clerics advocate the overthrow of their Sunni rulers, a great many are pressing their governments for social and economic reforms. Their efforts are hampered by the lack of a coherent political program and by rivalry among the Shia leaders for recognition from Khomeini. [redacted]

[redacted]

Peninsula leaders have been slow to respond to the new dissidence. Traditionally, the oil-rich states have used their wealth to co-opt the political opposition. They have been lax in applying security measures and willing to overlook arms smuggling activities by dissidents. They have been especially tolerant of Palestinian groups. There are signs, however, that this tolerance has reached its limits and that the peninsula states intend more stringent measures to counter the insurgency threat:

- Representatives of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman met in Taif in mid-October and reportedly agreed to exchange intelligence on subversive activities in the area, improve military cooperation, and make an "extraordinary" effort to improve relations with Iran.
- Kuwait and Bahrain are closely monitoring the activities of Shia and leftist dissidents. In the past several months, both countries have put restrictions on public gatherings, closed some Shia meeting houses, and increased security patrols. In September, Kuwait arrested the son of Iranian-born Shia religious leader Shaykh Abbas al-Mihri, stripped the family of its Kuwaiti citizenship, and deported it to Iran. Shia dissident leader al-Akri remains under arrest in Bahrain, while Shaykh Muhammad Hadi al-Mudarrasi was deported from the UAE and

Bahrain. Arrests and deportations of Shia leaders because of their outspoken criticism of the ruling families serve as a warning to other Shia and leftist spokesmen to keep their comments and political activities within "reasonable" limits. Mihri and Mudarrasi were both representatives of Khomeini, and their deportations underlined Kuwaiti and Bahraini apprehensions about Iranian attempts to export the revolution across the Gulf.

- Saudi Arabia, concerned about efforts by Iran to export its revolution and stir up the 125,000 Shias in the kingdom, cracked down on Iranian agitators visiting the kingdom for the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Saudi officials, who reportedly had information that Palestinian pilgrims were involved with the Iranians in demonstrations against the Al Saud family, protested the politicization of the Hajj to Iranian authorities and ordered all Iranian pilgrims to leave the country immediately. Paradoxically, the Saudis are also cooperating more closely with Iraq in the security field.
- As a result of the attempted takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca, Saudi officials will now require security personnel to be present in mosques during Friday prayers, will permit only officially authorized imams or their representatives to speak, and will intensify monitoring of student groups.
- UAE security officials have alerted military, police, and intelligence personnel to tighten security at ports of entry and especially in Ras al-Khaymah, where UAE officials are concerned about arms smuggling into Iranian Khuzistan, Baluchistan, and Oman.
- Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai have banned the sale of alcoholic beverages in most public places, a prohibition long sought by the Saudis.
- Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait are cutting back on their hiring of Palestinian teachers and are moving Palestinian skilled workers in the oil and other key industries to less sensitive jobs.
- Kuwait and Bahrain are giving preference to hiring non-Arab foreigners for specific jobs and durations to reduce the numbers of foreigners who stay in the country.

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- Kuwait and Bahrain are talking about reopening their national assemblies, and Kuwait has formed a committee to revise its constitution. Although neither country is expected to widen the political franchise—limited to native-born male citizens—or agree to any new power-sharing arrangements, it is possible Shias will receive more government attention.

External events have obviously aided attempts by Gulf dissidents to rebuild their strength. The revolution in Iran, Arab rejection of the Camp David Accords, the deterioration of US influence because of its role in arranging those accords, the isolation of Egypt, the demonstration of Soviet military power in Afghanistan and political power in South Yemen, and the weakening of the Saudi Arabian Government by all these, plus the takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca by Saudi dissidents, have all reinforced the view that the smaller Gulf states are more vulnerable to political destabilization. Gulf leaders at least see the dangers, but it remains questionable whether their response will be more innovative than simple repression.

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