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Modernization in the Gulf region as a means of legitimacy? An examination from normative perspectives of state studies

ABSTRACT

For several years, the Arab Gulf states have been undergoing a period of social opening and economic modernization, which are referred to as 'reforms'. Notably, however, these do not affect the political institutions. One particularly important observation is that the leaderships in the Gulf region are using this new modernization strategy to turn away from traditional sources of legitimacy. Most importantly, Islam is being relegated to the background. This article is dedicated to exploring the question of whether the tendency to modernization on the part of the Arab Gulf states embodies a kind of rationalization of the sociopolitical realm that introduces a new form of legitimacy for the state. The article postulates that this predominant focus on aspects of modernization can have a contrary effect and can even damage the legitimacy of the state in the Gulf region, as long as it does not consider the social values and refrains from introducing political reforms. The analysis is based on three theoretical approaches: those of Karl Mannheim, Hermann Heller and Jürgen Habermas.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The transformative events stemming from the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010/11 have unequivocally compelled not only the Gulf region's governments but also researchers to redirect their focus from external affairs to the intricacies of domestic politics. This paradigm shift underscores the imperative of closely examining the domestic domain in comprehending the region and its geopolitical alignments (Fawcett 2016: 212–13). The recent social and economic transformations in the Arab Gulf states can be seen as a response to the challenges brought about by these upheavals (Tétreault et al. 2011). These changes are noticeable in several areas: Examples include restructuring of national economies, digitization of bureaucratic systems, promotion and development of the tourism sector and moves towards renewable energies. This wave of modernization indicates a shared tendency in the Gulf countries to diversify their economies and end their dependence on oil resources. It is therefore a 'reform process in the direction of a more production-oriented economy' (Hvidt 2011: 99). The pursuit of modernization stands as a collective endeavour among all six Gulf States, notwithstanding certain disparities in their overarching political trajectories. As aptly articulated by Khnodker (2011: 305), the aspiration to foster a knowledge-based modern society and cultivate a sustainable, diversified economy has emerged as a common objective across many nations within the region. While the political economies of these states may diverge, their technocratic ambitions converge.

A closer look at the scope of these modernizations reveals that they do not affect political institutions. This is hardly surprising, however, as the ruling elites lead and steer the new modernization policy (Kamrava 2018). For this reason, little attention is paid to political or social grievances such as authoritarianism and nepotism. This modernization policy is about vertical change from top to bottom, which largely neglects the horizontal constellations, factors and circumstances. Modernization theory encompasses not only processes of economic growth and technological progress but also the transformation of the political order and the restructuring of social relations (Acemoglu and Robinson 2022; Arts et al. 2006). Some theoretical approaches assume that the modernization of various social and economic areas leads to the modernization of political values such as freedom, equality and pluralism. Nevertheless, it can be observed that modernization policies in the Gulf region largely disregard the political participation of society.

It is evident that the improvement in the economic situation is a significant motivating factor for the leaders in the region. Nevertheless, political motivations for the current push towards modernization should not be ignored. Furthermore, the failure to integrate political institutions into the modernization process is accompanied by a particularly noteworthy observation: Islam is now being pushed into the background, even though it has traditionally provided justification for the policies of the leaderships and ultimately formed the basis of their legitimacy (Mandaville and Hamid 2018: n.pag.; Ehteshami 2013: 173; Masoud 1999). This evolution suggests that the political ruling elites in the Gulf region are turning away from traditional means of legitimization in this new modernization strategy. Seen in this light, the relationship between religion (Islam) and political legitimacy appears to be undergoing a new shift. It remains unclear, however, whether this modernization strategy can provide a coherent basis for the legitimacy of the state.

Modernization in the Gulf region can be seen as an interplay of four elements: (1) the (Gulf) state (2) uses modernization (3) as a means of strengthening its legitimacy (4) vis-à-vis society. In times of political crisis or difficulty, a strong focus on the modernization of material distribution of resources can be seen as an attempt to deliberately distract from political reforms (Schlumberger 2010). Since such a strategy implies manipulation of society, it may damage rather than support the legitimacy of the state. This article therefore assumes that material or functional legitimacy cannot replace political legitimacy. This thesis underlines the normative character of the concept of the state, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The vertical implementation of modernization policy means that individual and collective participation is not recognized or even tolerated by state leaders. Since this modernization is a reaction to changes that are fundamentally social and political in nature, social constructions cannot be ignored. Therefore, an interpretative approach is needed that does not conditionally take collectivism and individualism as opposing paradigms. In this respect, this article will approach the analysis of the current sociopolitical changes in the Gulf States with focus not on structural conditions but rather on the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon of modernization in the region. The term 'cultural' is used here in the broadest sense of the word, to refer to the interrelationships of social conditions. This enables a sober examination of the relationships between the four elements mentioned above.

If modernization is defined as the transformation of a generally traditional situation into a new, i.e. modern, situation, then the focus of the cultural aspect of modernization is rationalization: the assessment of whether the means and ends of this transformation are rational for social conditions (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In light of the above-mentioned thesis on the connection between political legitimacy and modernization, the question is whether modernization policies in the Gulf States embody a kind of rationalization of the sociopolitical sphere that can be used to introduce a new form of legitimacy for the state. From this perspective, three concepts make up the analytical context: modernization, rationalization and legitimization. In order to create an epistemological basis for the discussion of these concepts, a theoretical schematic representation is needed which, first, deals with the explanation of the relationship between rationalization and modernization and, second, discusses the connection between modernization and (political) legitimacy.

One approach that provides a foundation for a corresponding discussion of rationalization and modernization is Karl Mannheim's distinction between functional and substantive rationality from a sociological perspective. The connection between modernization and legitimacy will then be examined. This can be done using two approaches. Normative perspectives of the legitimacy of the state can be illustrated by Hermann Heller's considerations on state theory, and Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 2004) will be used to explain modernization and its effects on the individual as well as on society.

MODERNIZATION AND RATIONALIZATION

The phenomenon of modernization in the Gulf region can be assessed by looking at its rationality. The concept of rationalization is a key term for understanding the changes in the region. 'Rationalization' here refers to the ordering and systematization of reality with the aim of making it predictable and controllable

(van der Loo and van Reijen 1997: 132). According to Karl Mannheim, the sociological sense of the word 'rationalization' signifies the organization of actions so that they help to achieve a given goal (Mannheim 1951: 53). Therefore, rationalization refers to the process of how a goal is achieved. Whether the goal itself is rational, however, is another matter. Mannheim therefore makes a distinction between functional and substantial rationality.

Functional rationality refers to the organization of actions that lead to a specific goal, whereby each action is attributed a functional significance from the end goal. This rationality depends on means and ends. However, any action that concentrates solely on this well-organized system of means and ends is considered functionally irrational and impairs the functional order. Substantial rationality, on the other hand, concerns the assessment of the end and conveys rational insight into the broad context of phenomena and events. One might say that functional rationalization is linked to the questions of what can be achieved and how, whereas substantial rationality is concerned with the questions of why and for what purpose a certain end is to be achieved (Mannheim 1951: 53–55).

Mannheim's analysis is based on the context of through-industrialization, which does not apply to the current situation in the Arab Gulf countries. Nevertheless, one can speak of a common aspect that does not concern the context, but rather the conceptual substance of the situation: in the Gulf region, it is a matter of modernization with a form of material-functional rationalization of various areas, e.g. infrastructure development, but there is a lack of projects that bring about cultural change at the level of social conditions. Considering the lack of any social phenomenon precipitating a trend towards modernization, it is difficult to justify a view of modernization as a social necessity. In the case of European through-industrialization, functional rationalization presents itself as necessary, as this requires through-organization. Mannheim's critique of the neglect of substantive rationality at the expense of a predominant focus on functional rationalization is a call to establish a rational relationship between the two in order to avoid the appearance of resistance on the path of change. With modernization in the Gulf countries, its connection with society seems barely identifiable, and therefore the evaluation of its purposes for society may hardly be grasped. It seems difficult to see a proportionate link between the process of modernization and societal interests. Especially when it is claimed that this modernization can lead to economic growth, the question then arises as to what effect this can have on society as long as social constellations are disregarded.

Today, there is no doubt that there is a movement in the societies of the Gulf region calling for political and social change (Moritz 2018). However, the political or social change can be, in some circumstances, not only problematic but also challenging. In fact, the Gulf States highlight the role of individuals on the way to a new era and have introduced several procedures towards improving human rights in different fields, particularly workers' and women's rights (Walker 2023). However, obvious political reforms that include and/or promote the engagement of individuals are still not conceivable. This point is essential as it can not only help to explain the nature of the current phenomena of change in the region but may even provide a certain degree of predictability. Economic, political and social changes could affect or reshape the different relations in a society (Inglehart 1997).

While some human rights reforms seem to be a reaction to criticism from outside, this should not undermine the significance of these reforms. One can

agree with Scott Walker that the Gulf countries 'have made great progress in economic and social rights' and that 'economic and social changes in the region are inevitable and that these changes will likely lead GCC governments toward better human rights performance in the medium-to-long term' (2023: 128). Nonetheless, it is surprising, to a certain extent, that people's participation in political decision-making is not accepted by the ruling elites. This lack of social participation is one reason for the difficulty in delineating the modernization process with any degree of precision.

A policy of modernization definitely has a new vision for social conditions that can lead to a new value system. However, the new value system should be recognized by social structures, and this recognition can only come to fruition through the participation of society in the modernization process. A characteristic feature of modernization in the Gulf region is its disregard for general social interests. This leads to the provisional conclusion that this form of modernization embodies a typical functional rationalization, as it only emphasizes a rationalization of the realization of the ruling elites' ends and hardly considers the interests, demands and values in their respective societies. The fact that this modernization does not bring with it any substantial rationalization may engender scepticism as to whether it can deal with social and political problems.

MODERNIZATION AND LEGITIMACY

The concept of (political) legitimacy is extremely ambiguous and its definition varies according to the research perspective used (sociological, empirical, normative, etc.). With regard to the relevant context in the Gulf region, it can be seen that this legitimacy is basically that which is aimed at ensuring the satisfaction of society by means of material benefits (allocation state model) (Hvidt 2011; Demmelhuber 2011; Schlumberger 2010). The allocation of material resources from oil revenues, the granting of subsidies, the creation of jobs in state employment sectors and, last but not least, the expansion of healthcare and the education system are characteristics of the maintenance of political loyalty in the Gulf region. Although this structural legitimacy based on institutionalization contributes to the stability of the political system, it may not be enough on its own if it does not guarantee the political participation of the population and if the existence of institutions that are representative of society as a whole is not taken into account (Hudson 1977: 15). Schlumberger also makes the same observation, as 'after 20 years of structural economic reform, hardly any Arab country has established effective competition policies' (Schlumberger 2010: 246).

With the powerful dynamics and challenges that the 2010/11 upheavals posed to the Arab ruling systems in general, one result seems to be undisputable: 'As the Arab Uprisings demonstrated, and as is well known from other historic experiences, even the most authoritarian regime is dependent on some level of acceptance by their citizens' (Butenschøn 2017: 247). In this sense, the leaderships of the Gulf States should think of new strategies to ensure the durability and stability of their rule. Particularly regarding the rise of political Islam or Islamism, liberalism and sectarianism that the Arab Spring foregrounded, these ideological phenomena 'have manifested themselves as new challenges destabilizing the conservative sociopolitical structure underpinning the Gulf region since the pre-state era' (Binhuwaidin 2015: 2, 13).

An interest in long-term stability through new strategies is not different from the interest in developing new approaches to legitimacy. While any new modernization policy in the Gulf region may be interpreted as an instrument for replacing Islam as fount of legitimacy, it appears equally to be a reaction to political domestic challenges. There is no doubt that this modernization is carried out at the behest of governments, with the aim of supporting the material interests of their populations. From this perspective, modernization with its economic means appears as an expedient, purely functional factor of influence in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled (Gray 2018: 31, 32, 35).

LEGITIMACY THROUGH THE COMMON WILL

As with Max Weber, the concept of (political) legitimacy for Hermann Heller is linked to the concept of rule. To rule means 'to find obedience by one's own means, if necessary to enforce obedience by one's own means' (Heller 1927: 36, translation added). But unlike Weber, Heller's concept of docility is related to the fact that 'the content of the commands arises democratically through the unification of the wills of the subjects' (1927: 40, translation added). The term 'will' is central in Heller's political and constitutional thinking, as the formation of will individualizes the social order. This is why Heller (1927: 44) emphasizes the necessity of the objectivity of the will. This point of view refers to the normativity of Heller's understanding of the state (Robbers 1983: 90) which links the state with its function as guarantor of the law and the optimization of the will of the citizens.

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that Heller considers any form of dictatorship or authoritarianism unacceptable. Rule can be 'legitimized by the authority of the democratic will of the people' (Heller 1930: 20, translation added). A government has the task of representing the interests of its citizens and this can be realized through the rationality of the government's political actions. The rational actions of the state or its representatives reflect on the social conditions taking hold in society. The right decisions can only be made by planning social interaction, taking into account the norms, interests, needs, etc. of those involved. Nevertheless, the correctness of political decisions does not relate to knowledge-based criteria or principles but to the ideas of those involved and their willingness to accept the corresponding decisions. This communication of perspectives builds the transition to society (Henkel 2011: 279–81).

For Heller, legitimacy of states is linked to an essential consideration that he particularly emphasizes: *volonté générale* ('common will'). In his understanding, the 'common will' is the determining factor for the conceptualization of the state; it constitutes the core of politics and the state. The state is the unified cooperation of certain human acts, equal in this to all other human associations. Although the state is fundamentally separate from them, it represents the guarantee of all cooperation in this area (Heller 1927: 81). In this respect, the individualistic as well as the collectivistic character of *volonté générale* is abolished, since the individual and the community are correlated, mutually dependent (1927: 84). In this way, the concept of political representation takes on a certain implication: the state as a representative organ represents 'in itself the values and forces of a community united in the unity of a will' (1927: 81, translation added).

The *volonté générale* is only expressed when it becomes a unified whole, encompassing all members and excluding particular interests or tendencies. It makes unification of will possible for (political) decisions to be reasonable for

all and to be accepted by all. The freedom of all is a prerequisite for achieving unification and shaping the whole. A majority decision that is not reasonable for all, and is not accepted by all, is therefore illegitimate.

Based on these considerations by Heller, the modernization policies of the Gulf States can be examined from a new sociological perspective. As long as legitimacy is primarily described and shaped in the form of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, the adoption of a policy of modernization can ultimately be regarded as a means of acquiring legitimacy, and this is with the unmistakable intention of justifying the rule of those in power. Such modernization is a political decision or a political action that is adopted and implemented by the respective governments. Individuals/citizens and social groups do not participate in the decision-making process, and this is, first, because the freedom of citizens, which Heller presents as an indispensable prerequisite for the real optimization of the *volonté générale*, is generally restricted and, second, because the current state structures in the region are unsuitable for accommodating extensive public participation.

In accordance with Heller's approach, it can be posited that the processes of modernization represent a 'will of the state', which, however, does not necessarily align with the 'will of the people' due to the absence of societal participation. Conversely, it can be argued that the silence of the populations in the Gulf region indicates that modernization policies are reasonable, accepted and aligned with the general will. Nevertheless, it can be contended that governments do not organize majorities in support of their modernization processes. This suggests that the acceptance of modernization by the general public may not be guaranteed. What is lacking is the political organization that encompasses not only state acts but also society and its demands.

Political decisions cannot simply and directly be based on the common will. A more realistic standard might hold that a decision corresponds to the common will if it is accepted by all. In a democratic constitutional state, this can be ascertained through various communication channels. In states where the political participation of citizens is restricted, however, the opinion of the people can only be measured with difficulty. In the Arab Gulf states, political participation is highly limited. The mere holding of elections for parliaments or local authorities cannot represent the political participation of citizens. When the governments in the Gulf region felt threatened by the changes of the Arab Spring, they introduced 'top-down reforms such as approving salary increases, investing in infrastructure projects to expand water and electricity supplies, and instituting some cosmetic political reforms such as increasing the number of electors in local and national elections' (Akkaya 2019: 120). Such adjustment measures do not enable citizens to participate in political processes and have a say in social conditions. It can now be concluded from this that these reforms do not help to open up domestic politics, but rather align with the strategic calculations of the ruling elites (Gray 2018: 39). This is because such reforms do not address the common will and therefore cannot lead to any change in the social order.

This assertion is based on the observation that, despite all the heterogeneity, public opinion in the Gulf States is still very limited. With this restriction of the public political sphere, talk of the common will loses its meaning. Heller attaches particular importance to public opinion, which is identical to political will, and is therefore indispensable to his own conception of the state: 'The enormous political significance of public opinion consists in the fact that, through its approval or disapproval, it secures those conventions which are

the foundations of social cohesion and state unity' ([1934] 1970: 174, translation added). If the Gulf States aim to strengthen their legitimacy through top-down reforms, Heller emphasizes that public opinion has the function of legitimizing political rule ([1934] 1970: 174).

While the economic sphere and certain aspects of human rights such as the promotion of women in the workforce in various sectors (Al-Waqfi and Al-Faki 2015) are given a special significance, there remains a notable absence of genuine interest in formulating a political vision aimed at reforming the sociopolitical dynamics within the broader societal framework. Moreover, in all Gulf countries, the authority to make political decisions predominantly rests in the hands of the ruling elites. In matters pertaining to security and foreign policies, parliamentary bodies or other state institutions wield minimal influence. This not only underscores the prevalence of authoritarian governance but also raises questions regarding the representation and the legitimacy of the rule. However, the central focus lies not on the procedural conception of political legitimacy in decision-making processes, which pertains to institutional frameworks, but rather on the normative perspective. Here, the substantive conception of political legitimacy is emphasized, relating to the justification of political decisions. Such justification necessitates the provision of reasons for agreement or disagreement. Accordingly, a distinction is drawn between justifying reasons 'that all can accept or that no one can reasonably reject' (public reason conception of political legitimacy) and reasons that posit 'normative practical reasons are, or are given by, objective facts, and whether political decisions are justified depends on how well they are supported by those reasons' (objective reason conception of political legitimacy) (Peter 2019: 148). Both categories underscore the critical role of public opinion.

ONE-SIDED MODERNIZATION

While Mannheim saw such functional rationalization as a paralysis of average judgement, Max Weber saw bureaucracy, which he understood as the rationalization of collective action, as a threat to human action and individual creativity (although he recognized bureaucracy in modernity as an inevitable development). This perspective can contribute to a better understanding of modernization in the Arab Gulf states. For this purpose, the approach of Jürgen Habermas is used, who in his two-volume work *Theory of Communicative Action* modifies Weber's ideas and links them to contemporary contexts.

Habermas assumes that the cohesion of a society is only possible through solidarity. A society consists of a certain interaction between two spheres: system and lifeworld. Habermas identifies the system with bureaucratic apparatuses, the state and the economy. The system is characterized by instrumental rationalization through certain means such as bureaucratization, organization and juridification. The system thus refers to the 'material reproduction' of society, since it involves the achievement of concrete ends. The lifeworld, on the other hand, includes people, as subjects or personalities, and small social networks. It is characterized by power and domination-free communication processes between actors, which represent a different form of rational decision-making through processual cooperation. In the lifeworld, agreement is sought on three claims to validity: what the concrete case is (truth), what is right (rightness) and what is truthful (truthfulness) (Habermas [1981] 2004: 87, 88, 93). These provide a rational, reason-orientated basis for communicative action.

For Habermas, the rationality of communicative action in the lifeworld consists in the fact that understanding is achieved through a 'process of mutually convincing one another [...] on the basis of motivation by reasons' ([1981] 2004: 392). It is 'a consensus that depends on yes/no responses to claims potentially based on grounds', and communicative actions 'always require an interpretation that is rational in approach' ([1981] 2004: 106). In this way, Habermas emphasizes the centrality of reason to the relationship between system and lifeworld. For if actions are coordinated on the basis of understanding, then one can speak of the coordination of rationalities, which ultimately leads to a 'communicative reason' (Habermas [1981] 2004: 398).

The significance of communicative processes therefore lies in the fact that they equip individuals with communication-orientated repertoires and thus enable them to critically engage with other actors. On this basis, reasonable decisions or judgements can be negotiated, creating a foundation for rational actions and sociation of individuals. Through this depiction of communicative rationality, Habermas arrives at a critique of social structures. While the communicative processes of understanding realize the integration of the members of society, they are prevented by the maintenance imperatives of the system. The communicative reason of the lifeworld is opposed by the functionalist reason of the system, which undermines the rationalization of the lifeworld. The system reifies the various areas of life in the present through two media, power and money, which determine social relations and can impair communication processes by supplanting the principle of better arguments in linguistic interaction.

However, the media of power and money 'fail to work in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they cannot replace the action-coordinating mechanism of mutual understanding in these functions' (Habermas [1981] 2006: 322). Based on this, Habermas puts forward his thesis of the 'colonization of the lifeworld' due to the intrusion of bureaucratic authorities. It points out that people's scope for action is being pushed into a role as 'consumers' or 'clientele'. In Habermas's understanding, this is a 'reification of social relations' ([1981] 2004: 360) with which he expresses his criticism of the instrumental and strategic rationalization of areas of life (Habermas [1981] 2006: 325). If the social solidarity is achieved through non-dominating and fair communicative communication processes between people, with the colonization of the lifeworld, these communication processes are replaced by formal regulatory processes.

In his theoretical approach, Habermas refers to a problem in capitalist societies, which, however, also includes some aspects related to modernization in the Arab Gulf countries. The modernization processes at work here are based on a similar form of colonization of the lifeworld by systems. While political participation is hardly effective in these states, the systems have an absolute ascendancy over social relations. For Habermas, system and lifeworld are interdependent, and crisis situations arise when the regulatory processes of the system, through bureaucratization, juridification and monetization, impair the core of the lifeworld, which is communicative action between individuals. At this point, the relationship between the system and the lifeworld becomes critical. In the Arab Gulf region, as in the other Arab countries, the lifeworld, i.e. the public sphere, has been marginalized for years (Yom 2005), but the current modernization measures led and implemented by the systems can be read as a further restriction of its scope of action, as they do not allow for a rational communicative understanding or coordination at the level of the lifeworld of individuals.

Modernization is a situation in a specific historical context that has to be negotiated by those involved in order to arrive at a 'definition of the situation', and this 'definition of the situation establishes an order' (Habermas [1981] 2004: 100). It is precisely when the sectors of the system have their own definition of the situation that cooperative interaction between the participants should take place in order to reach a consensus on the structure of action and plans for action. This communicative model of action respects the values and norms and moral principles and is based on a rationally founded agreement. Looking at the mechanism of modernization in the Gulf States, however, one can speak of a 'strategic model of action rest[ing] content with an explication of the features of action oriented directly to success' (Habermas [1981] 2004: 101).

In recent years, the Gulf States have struggled with the fall in oil prices; to find a way out of this problem, many states have introduced income taxation in addition to cutting some essential subsidies. This is a significant shift in the overall economic policy in the Gulf region, which was known for its zero income taxes. There are also intentions to decrease energy subsidies (increasing fuel prices, electricity and water tariffs, etc.). As this change directly affects citizens and their standard of living, the Gulf States feel compelled to justify these reform policies. The state needs rational channels of communication with society for such justification, as this move could have a negative impact on the legitimacy of the state. It is clear that this restructuring implies a kind of reformulation of state–society relations (Young 2020) and could have consequences on the underlying social contract of the rentier states (Al-Saidi 2020: 70).

Habermas makes it clear that the processes of communication between people are a necessity for every society. While these are disempowered or devalued in democratic capitalist societies through the control of money and power media, they are largely irrelevant in the Gulf States because they are de facto not recognized by those in power (Babar 2017). The current modernization policies do not seem to change this situation for two reasons. First, these modernization policies are not aimed at changing the structure of the ruling system, and, second, the ruling elites turn modernization into an 'instrumental rationalization' that ensures the exclusion of the lifeworld and its patterns of interaction from the political sphere. This does not mean that the processes of modernization and rationalization should simply be rejected. Rather, the criticism is directed at the one-sided monopoly of these processes in the Gulf States, which largely ignore social structures. The exclusion of social structures from the processes of modernization cannot remain without consequences, since these processes have a direct impact on this society, on its values and norms, and on private lifestyles. The position of Islam in the context of modernization will now be illustrated.

MODERNIZATION, RELIGION AND LEGITIMACY

The assumption was made above that the reform discourse of modernization is employed by the governments in the Gulf countries as a strategy to legitimate their rule vis-à-vis their societies and to justify their policies (Hvidt 2015). In light of the rise of political Islam since the Arab revolutions of 2010/11, it can be argued that the wave of modernization in the Gulf region undertaken by the leaderships is intended to limit the increase in the influence of political Islam by presenting modernization as an alternative to traditional norms, values, perceptions, etc., which mainly stem from Islamic principles. Prior

to the Arab Spring, Islam played a contradictory role: 'Islam is both avowed enemy and jealously defended state religion. [...] It is part of a repressive state's attempt to make up for what it lacks in democratic legitimacy by wrapping itself in the mantle of Islamic legitimacy' (Masoud 1999: 128).

From the perspective of the Gulf States, the upheavals of the Arab Spring were perceived as a destabilizing influence (Colombo 2012). Following the ascension of Islamist forces to power in Egypt and Tunisia, several governments in the Gulf region (especially in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) adopted a more assertive stance against this political trend. For instance, prior to 2011 or 2012, the Saudi government engaged in a form of dialogue with the Islamic reformist voices within the kingdom (Alshamsi 2011). However, since that time, a new religious narrative has been used to counter the world-view of political Islam and shape a new 'religious identity' (Farouk and Brown 2021: 8). This new approach to dealing with Islam in the Gulf region is justified by invoking the fight against terrorism and extremism. Moreover, this approach is deliberately positioned within the context of modernization by the governments which use it. This model of modernization represents a new modern claim to legitimacy, which presents itself as an alternative to the old traditional source of legitimacy derived from Islam. Nevertheless, it is evident that this anti-terror approach is designed to eradicate opposition to the government, a strategy that has already been met with criticism. The suspension of the rule of law and the absolute vulnerability of the citizen are oxymoronic concepts that are inherent to this approach (Filiu 2011: 75).

In this context, it is possible to posit a heterogeneous form of 'political modernization' that encompasses both economic and power-related elements. In his 1974 work, Donald E. Smith identifies three key aspects of political modernization: 'polity secularization', 'mass politicization' and 'developmental capacity expansion'. It is evident that the Gulf States are engaged in efforts to achieve socio-economic transformation. Smith defines 'polity secularization' as 'the process by which a traditional system undergoes radical differentiation, resulting in separation of the polity from the religious structures, substitution of secular modes of legitimation, and extension of the polity's jurisdiction into areas formerly regulated by religion' (1974: 4). In this sense, it is important to recognize that modernization and secularization of political legitimation are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are intertwined, with modernization often linked to mass politicization. In accordance with Mannheim, Heller and Habermas, mass politicization underscores the significance of political participation, which facilitates the emergence of novel structures of social (or collective) consciousness. Smith posits that 'once a relatively high level of political consciousness is attained by citizens, the political process becomes self-sustaining' (1974: 10).

The states in the Gulf region do not say explicitly that they equate the process of modernization with the process of secularization. It is, in fact, a possibility that the rulers do not consider secularization to be a goal in and of itself. However, their efforts to regulate Islamist activities and to diminish the influence of Islamic traditions in various social institutions suggest a conscious effort to secularize the structures of society. This implied form of profanation is, intentionally or unintentionally, a form of secularization, which is of course contextual. Secularism is a product of western modernity based on different historical developments, above all industrialization and 'the pervasive influence of science' (Berger 1967: 110). This is not an issue here, but there is a sociological and epistemological assumption that 'the empirical evidence about

religion in the contemporary world did not support secularization theory', and that this secularization theory is a 'very Eurocentric enterprise, an extrapolation of the European situation' (Berger 2012: 313). While secularism is a consequence of modernity, it is not the sole variant (Reaves 2012).

The use of this argument serves to illustrate that religion simply does not contradict modernity. The assertion that secularization in western modernity resulted from historical developments implies that it was not imposed as a top-down command. It is important to note that secularism in western culture has been a movement against the concentration of power of the church as a religio-political institution. This does not apply to Islam in the Gulf States, as the elements of power here are completely in the hands of the rulers and governments rather than in the Islamic institutions. It can be reasonably assumed that the introduction of this new religious policy is an attempt to mitigate the potential political implications of Islamism. With the exception of Qatar, the leaders of the Gulf States are aware that Islamists may challenge the legitimacy of their rule and threaten their survival. Consequently, the crackdown on Islamism may be seen as an attempt to contain Islamist movements before they gain more power and/or traction. A further concern is the lack of distinction between 'radical Islamism' and 'moderate Islamism' (Grinin et al. 2019: 107), despite the failure of extreme secularism in other regional countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq.

It is also questionable whether the current social structures in the Gulf region are conducive to the process of religious displacement. Technological and bureaucratic developments may reduce the presence of religion in society, but not necessarily religious belief (Dhima and Golder 2020). Even if secularization theory is still 'the dominant theory on religion in the social sciences' in the West and remains 'influential' (Fox 2015: 16), this is hardly compatible with the role of religion in the Gulf countries. Religion continues to gain relevance in the societies of the Gulf region. The actions of the ruling leaderships against the Islamists or scholars who are politically and socially engaged convey the unmistakable signal that the impact of religion in society may be on the increase, rather than the reverse. Consequently, a top-down imposition of secularization as an aspect of modernization can compromise the claims to legitimacy of the ruling elites, as it may call into question the legitimacy of the state itself:

> [T]hese [top-down changes and relaxations in the Gulf monarchies' societies] are leading to mounting frustration and resentment from some sections of the national populations, especially those who believe that their governments and ruling families are not doing enough to preserve their values and traditions. In turn this is eroding the monarchies' legitimacy resources, especially relating to traditional authority and Islam.
>
> (Davidson 2013: 155)

This approach to Islam can be understood as a political strategy employed by ruling systems to keep their power untouched and can therefore hardly be classified as a form of modernization. Based on the fact that '[t]he role of religion in the Middle East is huge since it is the leading paradigm in all spheres of life' (Grinin et al. 2019: 39), it is evident that the state's policy of suppressing Islamic values could lead to instability; this is because such a policy could motivate new waves of radical Islamism.

CONCLUSION

The modernization initiatives carried out by the leaders in the Arab Gulf region can be understood as a tactical action that implies a modification or adaptation to recent developments both internally and externally. This represents an attempt to enhance the socio-economic performance of the state towards its citizens. This may necessitate a rethinking of the claim to legitimacy, especially in light of the upheavals of the Arab Spring in 2010/11, which challenged the legitimacy of the Arab leaderships. Since the modernization processes are planned, implemented and enforced by the states (top-down), there is a growing suspicion that they are aimed at safeguarding the concentration of power that characterizes the status quo. The implementation of a change from a traditional (pre-modern) system to a new (modern) system is therefore not a priority.

The three approaches of Mannheim, Heller and Habermas have each pointed to the same conclusion: modernization without active integration of the public into the relevant processes is hardly conceivable. A modernization policy is a political action. In the Gulf region, this action is one-sided, functional, instrumental, strategic and success-orientated. It excludes social participation (Mannheim), the common will (Heller) and the collective expression of will (Habermas). For this reason, the efficacy of this modernization policy is both provisional and questionable.

It is noteworthy that modernization in the Gulf region has been accompanied by an increasing distancing from Islam since the revolts of the Arab Spring in 2010/11. It can therefore be reasonably assumed that modernization is presented as an alternative to Islamic principles as a basis for the legitimacy of the state. This can be linked to the political aim of containing the effects of political Islam. From this perspective, modernization can be understood as a form of secularization. This secularization appears to be problematic, as it is imposed from above and does not allow for social interaction or participation.

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