
SECULAR AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE GULF: THE POLITICS OF RELIGION, POWER AND RESILIENCE

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Abstract

This article explores secular authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where economic modernization, controlled liberalization, and securitization of political Islam sustain authoritarian rule. Using Authoritarian Resilience Theory, Securitization Theory, and Neoclassical Realism, it analyzes how economic growth substitutes for democratization, Islamist movements are framed as security threats, and foreign policy reflects elite survival strategies.

Findings reveal that economic reforms (e.g., Vision 2030, Centennial 2071) reinforce elite control rather than foster liberalization, while state-backed religious institutions and AI-driven surveillance suppress dissent. Externally, Gulf rulers balance ties between the U.S., China, and Russia to maximize regime security. The study concludes that secular authoritarianism in the Gulf is a deliberate strategy integrating economic incentives, religious control, and strategic alliances to maintain monarchical dominance.

Keywords: Secular authoritarianism, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, political Islam, securitization

1. Introduction

Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have developed a model of secular authoritarianism, where economic modernization, state-controlled liberalization, and securitization of Islam sustain monarchical rule without democratization [1 - 3]. Unlike traditional secular states, these regimes instrumentalize religion rather than eliminate it, using state-backed clerical institutions while suppressing independent Islamist movements [4; 5]. The economic transformation efforts seen in the blueprints of Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Centennial 2071 are not designed for political liberalization but rather serve as strategic tools to reinforce elite dominance, manage youth discontent, and attract global investment. While these reforms project an image of progressive governance, they function as substitutes for political participation rather than pathways to democratization [6].

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This article examines how the interplay between economic reforms, controlled religious narratives, and securitization strategies reinforces authoritarian stability in the Gulf. Furthermore, it explores how these domestic policies influence foreign relations, particularly in the framing of political Islam as a security threat and the balancing between global powers. To analyze these dynamics, the study applies a multi-theoretical approach [7 - 9] which will be elaborated in the Theoretical Framework section.

While this study focuses on Saudi Arabia and the UAE as emblematic cases of secular authoritarianism, other Gulf monarchies such as Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman exhibit varying degrees of religious control, political openness, and economic diversification. These differences stem from unique historical trajectories, sectarian dynamics, and political structures. However, elements of the Saudi-Emirati model — particularly the securitization of political Islam and strategic economic liberalization — have influenced broader trends within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Future comparative research could explore the exportability and limits of this model across the GCC.

2. Research Objectives and Hypothesis

This study investigates how economic liberalization, securitization, and state-controlled religious narratives sustain authoritarian rule in the Gulf. The core hypothesis posits that these regimes do not pursue genuine democratization but rather reconfigure the role of religion alongside modernization to maintain monarchical control while neutralizing pressures for political reform. By promoting a state-sanctioned version of Islam, while simultaneously framing independent religious actors as security threats, Gulf rulers ensure that religion remains an instrument of governance rather than a challenge to their authority.

To test this hypothesis, the study explores:

- How do Gulf regimes reframe the role of religion to maintain authoritarian stability?
- What mechanisms allow economic liberalization to replace religious legitimacy?
- How do societal actors (youth, clerics, activists) respond to these changes?

3. Theoretical framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical approach to analyze the resilience of authoritarian regimes in the Gulf. Authoritarian Resilience Theory examines how monarchies maintain stability by adapting to socio-economic pressures without democratization. Securitization Theory highlights how these regimes frame political Islam as a security threat to justify repression. Neoclassical Realism situates these domestic strategies within the broader geopolitical context, examining how Gulf monarchies hedge between global powers to maintain regime security.

3.1. Authoritarian Resilience Theory

Building on this framework, authoritarian resilience theory focuses on how non-democratic regimes sustain their rule through selective modernization while maintaining tight political control [7; 10]. Unlike democratization theories that link economic growth to political participation [11], authoritarian rulers strategically use controlled economic reforms to reinforce regime survival rather than encourage liberalization [12]. Their ability to balance traditional legitimacy with modern governance strategies further explains the persistence of these monarchies [13].

In the Gulf, state-led economic diversification initiatives serve as mechanisms of elite consolidation, ensuring that modernization remains within state control rather than fostering independent political or economic actors. This pattern mirrors historical cases such as Turkey under Atatürk and Ba'athist Iraq, where state-driven reforms modernized society while maintaining centralized power and preventing political liberalization.

Gulf regimes have adapted to modern governance challenges by shifting legitimacy from religious authority to economic performance [M. bin Salman, *Speech on Economic Transformation and Vision 2030*, Saudi Press Agency, 2017, available online at <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/leadership-messages>]. This study explores several key mechanisms:

- **Strategic Secularization and Economic Legitimization** – Unlike classical secularism, which seeks a strict separation of religion from the state, Gulf monarchies reframe and instrumentalize religion to reinforce state legitimacy [14]. By neutralizing potential opposition from religious institutions, regimes prevent clerical authorities from challenging state policies. Simultaneously, they promote economic modernization, technological advancement, and social liberalization as alternative sources of legitimacy. This is exemplified by Saudi Vision 2030's focus on entertainment and tourism and UAE Centennial 2071's emphasis on AI, fintech, and digital transformation [6].
- **Selective Repression vs. Co-optation** – Gulf rulers use a dual strategy of religious control: they reward loyal religious figures with institutional privileges while marginalizing or eliminating dissenting clerics. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and UAE's General Authority of Islamic Affairs serve as state-aligned religious bodies, reinforcing state narratives on religious matters [15]. In contrast, figures like Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who criticized Saudi rule, faced arrest and execution in 2016. The state determines which clerics are co-opted and which are repressed based on their political alignment, ensuring religious discourse does not challenge regime authority.
- **Youth and Social Transformation** – A growing number of Gulf youth prioritize economic mobility over religious identity as a source of legitimacy [1]. Governments capitalize on this shift by expanding state-controlled entertainment, entrepreneurship programs, and educational reforms, encouraging young citizens to focus on career development rather than political engagement. For example, Saudi Arabia's massive investment in entertainment (e.g., Riyadh Season, an annual festival featuring global

concerts, sports, and cultural events designed to promote tourism and state-led modernization) has successfully diverted youth attention away from political activism, while the UAE's entrepreneurship initiatives position economic success as a key avenue for social advancement. Similarly, large-scale music festivals such as MDLBeast Festival (a government-backed electronic music event attracting international DJs and artists, used to rebrand Saudi Arabia as a progressive entertainment hub while maintaining strict political control) reinforce the state narrative of controlled liberalization.

- **Rentierism and Domestic State Autonomy** – The resource-rich Gulf states maintain power through a rentier model, where oil and gas revenues finance public services and security forces. This system reduces the need for taxation, thereby minimizing public pressure for political participation [5; 16]. Unlike resource-poor authoritarian states, Gulf monarchies can sustain political repression without economic backlash, as state-controlled wealth allows them to suppress religious dissidents while maintaining high living standards for the general population.

3.2. *Securitization Theory*

Securitization theory [8] is applied to examine how Gulf regimes frame political Islam as an existential threat to justify domestic repression and foreign interventions. The study focuses on the following aspects:

- **Political Islam as an Existential Threat** – Gulf rulers categorize Islamist movements (Salafi-jihadist groups, Shi'a Islamist factions, and pan-Islamist revivalist movements), as existential threats to state stability. This enables them to implement restrictive measures under the pretext of counterterrorism and national security. The securitization of Islam is not about eliminating religion but about controlling its political expression, ensuring that religious discourse remains subordinate to state authority [2; 4].
- **State-Controlled Religious Discourse** – Governments in Saudi Arabia and the UAE monopolize religious narratives to present their interpretation of Islam as "moderate" and state-sanctioned, while labeling alternative interpretations as radical and subversive [17].
- **Legal and Institutional Mechanisms** – Gulf states pass counterterrorism laws and cybercrime regulations that criminalize political opposition under the guise of national security [18].
- **Regional Intervention and Anti-Islamist Coalitions** – The UAE and Saudi Arabia actively export their securitization of Islamism through military and financial support for regimes that suppress Islamists (e.g., in 2021, Saudi Arabia and the UAE endorsed the military coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which effectively removed civilian and Islamist-linked politicians from power) [K. Al-Anani, *Sudan Coup: The Regional Interference behind a Faltering Transition*, Arab Center Washington DC, December 11, 2021, available online at <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/sudan-coup-the-regional-interference-behind-a-faltering-transition>].

3.3. Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism explains how states' foreign policies are shaped by both systemic constraints (international pressures, power competition) and domestic political imperatives (elite survival, legitimacy concerns) [9]. Unlike classical realism, which focuses solely on power distribution in the international system, neoclassical realism accounts for internal regime dynamics, arguing that domestic leadership struggles, economic vulnerabilities, and legitimacy crises influence how states navigate global alliances [19].

In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy strategies are not merely responses to shifting global power dynamics but are also tools for internal political survival. Their strategic maneuvers reflect not only the international balance of power but also domestic elite competition and regime consolidation. This section explores three key dimensions of neoclassical realism in Gulf foreign policy:

- **Strategic Hedging and Great Power Balancing** – Gulf rulers balance security ties with the U.S. while deepening economic and military engagements with China and Russia. This dual-track strategy not only helps navigate global multipolarity but also insulates regimes from over-dependence on Western security guarantees. Saudi Arabia's growing energy cooperation with China and Russia's OPEC+ influence illustrates this balancing act, as does the UAE's increased defense partnerships with France and Russia [3].
- **Foreign Policy as an Extension of Domestic Power Struggles** – The consolidation of power by individual rulers, particularly Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) in the UAE, has played a pivotal role in shaping their foreign policy approaches [20].
 - MBS's 2017 Ritz-Carlton crackdown removed potential rivals, allowing him to unify Saudi policymaking under his authority. This led to an intensified security partnership with the U.S., while simultaneously strengthening economic and energy ties with China and Russia to diversify strategic options.
 - Similarly, MBZ restructured the UAE's economic governance, shifting control away from traditional merchant elites to state-led investment entities like Mubadala and ADNOC. This domestic restructuring was reflected in foreign policy, where MBZ expanded defense cooperation with Russia and France while maintaining security coordination with the U.S.
- **Risks and Trade-offs of Strategic Hedging** – While balancing between Western and non-Western powers provides Gulf states with greater strategic autonomy, it also creates new vulnerabilities [Robert Mogielnicki, *China and Russia in the Gulf: A Cacophony of Influence and Interest*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 17, 2024, available online at

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/china-and-russia-in-the-gulf-a-cacophony-of-influence-and-interest?lang=en>]:

- Western scrutiny over Gulf-China relations – Saudi Arabia’s involvement in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and increased arms purchases from Russia have raised concerns in Washington, leading to diplomatic tensions.
- Navigating economic dependencies – The UAE’s decision to halt a potential Chinese military facility in Abu Dhabi in 2021 highlights the difficulties of maintaining strategic ambiguity in an era of U.S.-China competition.

Thus, Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s foreign policy maneuvers cannot be fully explained through structural realism alone—they are deeply intertwined with domestic elite struggles, legitimacy concerns, and regime consolidation strategies.

3.4. Theoretical Tension Between Secularization and Autocratic Stability

Classical modernization theory posits that economic development leads to secularization, which in turn fosters democratization by weakening traditional authority structures and fostering rational-legal forms of legitimacy [21]. This linear assumption, rooted in mid-20th-century sociological frameworks, often fails to explain authoritarian contexts where secularization is strategically co-opted to reinforce, rather than erode, autocratic power [22].

The Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, present a clear deviation from this model. These regimes promote **state-managed secularization**, such as controlled liberalization, the marginalization of independent clerics, and the expansion of non-religious cultural sectors, not to democratize society, but to redirect sources of legitimacy from religion to economic performance and national modernization [1]. This model may be understood as **strategic secularization**, wherein religion is not privatized or excluded from public life, but selectively subordinated and reshaped to align with regime objectives.

Such a configuration raises a set of theoretical dilemmas. Can secularization, typically associated with institutional differentiation and liberal values, function as a tool of autocratic consolidation without generating long-term contradictions? And if traditional religious authorities are disempowered, what forms of legitimacy can sustainably replace them? These questions are especially salient in rentier states, where regimes avoid political concessions by financing generous welfare systems and public employment through oil revenues [23].

Moreover, Gulf-style secularization diverges from Western secularism in its **functional logic**. It does not seek a principled separation of religion and state, but rather asserts state primacy over religion while preserving its symbolic and social utility. This hybrid model—combining modern economic policy with authoritarian religious control—may offer short-term regime stability, but it remains unclear how it will adapt to **generational change**, rising political awareness, and potential legitimacy crises among younger citizens who expect both material advancement and greater voice [24].

The cases of Saudi Arabia and the UAE challenge dominant secularization paradigms and call for a more **context-sensitive** theoretical framework. Rather than assuming that secularization leads inevitably to liberalization or democracy, scholars must consider how autocratic regimes **instrumentalize secularism** in selective, strategic ways. This invites a reassessment of secularization theory that accounts for **illiberal secularisms**, especially in contexts where state power remains unchallenged, and modernization is pursued without democratization [25].

4. Research Design

This study follows a comparative case study approach, examining Saudi Arabia and the UAE as exemplars of secular authoritarianism. To analyze the role of state-driven modernization in reinforcing authoritarian resilience, I employ content analysis of key government documents, including Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and UAE Centennial 2071. These documents are instrumental in framing economic and social reforms while maintaining a controlled approach to secularization.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach:

1. **Content Analysis** - examining official state documents (e.g., Vision 2030, and the UAE's legal reforms) to assess secularization policies and their political function.
2. **Discourse Analysis** – evaluation of state-controlled media, political speeches, and government rhetoric to track how political Islam is securitized and how legitimacy is framed.
3. **Secondary Data Analysis** – use of policy reports, think-tank publications, and economic indicators to examine how economic modernization reinforces authoritarian resilience.

By integrating Authoritarian Resilience Theory, Securitization Theory, and Neoclassical Realism, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how Gulf autocracies strategically manage religion, control opposition, and navigate the international system while maintaining authoritarian stability.

Although the focus is on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, these cases are illustrative of broader regional patterns. A brief comparison with other GCC states is offered in the conclusion to contextualize the generalizability of the findings.

5. Findings: The Pillars of Secular Authoritarianism

The findings of this study align with the theoretical framework, demonstrating how Saudi Arabia and the UAE strategically integrate authoritarian resilience, securitization, and neoclassical realism to consolidate power while maintaining a controlled approach to secularization. This governance model ensures that secular authoritarianism is not merely a domestic adaptation but a comprehensive political strategy that spans economic, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions.

5.1. Economic and Social Adaptation Without Democratization (Authoritarian Resilience Theory)

Vision 2030 has restructured the economy in Saudi Arabia, expanding sectors like tourism, entertainment, and technology while maintaining strict political oversight [Government of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030*, Saudi Press Agency, Riyadh, 2016, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>]. The Public Investment Fund (PIF) controls privatization efforts, ensuring that economic liberalization remains concentrated within state-controlled entities. Similarly, the UAE's Centennial 2071 initiative prioritizes AI, fintech, and renewable energy, yet these industries are heavily regulated by state-linked enterprises such as Mubadala and ADNOC, preventing private sector autonomy [United Arab Emirates Government, *UAE Centennial 2071*, UAE Government Portal, Abu Dhabi, 2021, <https://www.government.ae>]. While these initiatives project an image of reform, they do not translate into political liberalization. Previous experiments with limited reforms—such as Saudi municipal elections to local councils (2005) and the UAE's consultative Federal National Council—failed to increase political participation, reinforcing a pattern of controlled liberalization as a regime survival strategy rather than a path toward genuine political change. The ruling elites retained control over the process, preventing any real shift in power.

Application to the Gulf Region

- **Economic Performance as a Substitute for Political Reform** – Unlike traditional democratic transitions, where economic development often correlates with demands for greater political participation [11], Gulf monarchies use economic growth as a substitute for democratization rather than a catalyst for it. To reinforce this model, governments frame economic instability and political unrest in democratizing states (e.g., the Arab Spring, and Lebanon's economic crisis) as cautionary examples, arguing that political liberalization leads to chaos.
- **State-Orchestrated Modernization** – Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Centennial 2071 are not liberalization projects but rather strategic adaptations aimed at securing elite and public loyalty while avoiding meaningful political competition [15]. In Saudi Arabia, the state dominates Vision 2030's megaprojects, requiring business elites and foreign investors to partner with government-affiliated entities, ensuring that the ruling family remains in control of economic transformation. The lifting of the driving ban for women and expansion of entertainment (e.g., Riyadh Season, MDLBeast music festivals) project an image of liberalization, yet political repression remains intact. For instance, Saudi authorities arrested women's rights activists like Loujain al-Hathloul in 2018, shortly after implementing reforms they had long campaigned for, signaling that social changes are state-controlled rather than grassroots political achievements.
- **Selective Economic Openness** – Gulf regimes encourage foreign investments, tourism, and technological advancements but shield political institutions from external influence [1]. This ensures that economic

liberalization remains decoupled from political reform. For example, the UAE strengthens economic ties with China through massive trade and tech partnerships (e.g., adopting Huawei 5G technology), while strictly limiting foreign influence from the West (USA/EU) on governance and labor rights. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's foreign direct investment (FDI) laws favor domestic elite-controlled enterprises, preventing foreign entities from challenging state influence over the private sector. For instance, the Saudi government has prioritized state-affiliated entities such as Saudi Aramco, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), and Vision 2030 megaprojects (e.g., NEOM) for high-value contracts, often sidelining independent foreign firms unless they form partnerships with local elites or government-backed entities. This approach ensures that economic modernization remains under state control rather than fostering an autonomous private sector.

- **Institutional Adaptation and Elite Co-optation** – By monopolizing state wealth and redistributing it through high-profile infrastructure projects, subsidies, and privileged contracts, Gulf regimes secure the loyalty of key economic actors while preventing the emergence of an independent middle class [14]. The UAE, for example, allocates government-backed contracts primarily to state-affiliated businesses, ensuring that economic power remains tied to political loyalty. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia channels PIF-controlled resources into large-scale construction and entertainment projects, sustaining an elite-driven economy while minimizing public control over financial decision-making.

5.2. Regional Interventionism and Domestic Religious Control Through Securitization Theory

Securitization Theory & Application to the Gulf Region

Securitization theory explains how states frame specific actors or ideologies as existential threats to justify extraordinary measures [8]. In authoritarian states, securitization often targets political opposition rather than genuine security threats, allowing rulers to consolidate power while suppressing dissent. Saudi Arabia and the UAE securitize Islamism by portraying political Islamist movements—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—as destabilizing forces, aligning with broader anti-Islamist narratives in their foreign policies. The Brotherhood is perceived as a threat by both states because it promotes political Islam—a vision of governance where Islamic principles influence political structures—which directly challenges the Gulf monarchies' model of secular authoritarianism and dynastic rule. Moreover, the Brotherhood's grassroots mobilization and transnational networks make it difficult for Gulf rulers to control, raising fears that it could inspire domestic opposition or create alternative sources of legitimacy beyond the state-controlled religious institutions. Unlike Western secularism, which marginalizes religious institutions from politics, Gulf states instrumentalize state-controlled religious authorities to reinforce official narratives, ensuring that independent religious actors remain politically neutralized.

However, securitization is not confined to domestic political control—Gulf regimes actively export this strategy regionally, supporting authoritarian allies who also suppress Islamist movements, ensuring that Islamist politics remain marginalized across the Middle East.

Domestic Securitization Mechanisms in the Gulf

- **Framing Political Islam as a Security Threat** – Saudi Arabia and the UAE actively depict Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, as existential threats to national stability [18; 26]. In 2014, both countries designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, equating it with ISIS and al-Qaeda under Saudi Arabia’s anti-terror law. This law grants authorities broad powers to criminalize dissent and delegitimize independent religious actors.
- **Institutional Mechanisms of Securitization** – Through anti-terrorism laws, cybercrime regulations, and state-controlled religious institutions, regimes criminalize Islamist opposition while monopolizing religious discourse [27]. A key example is Saudi Arabia’s 2017 crackdown on Islamist figures, which included the arrest of prominent scholar Salman al-Odah. Al-Odah, a well-known cleric who previously advocated for reform, was detained after posting a tweet expressing hope for Saudi-Qatar reconciliation, which was interpreted as undermining state policy. His arrest was part of a broader campaign to silence Islamist scholars, activists, and intellectuals under the pretext of counterterrorism and national security. In the UAE, the 2014 Anti-Terror Law expanded state control over religious discourse, allowing authorities to criminalize unauthorized fatwas and Islamic opinions that contradict state policy. The UAE’s Council of Fatwa, established in 2018, centralizes religious rulings, ensuring that all Islamic interpretations align with government-approved narratives. These legal frameworks institutionalize securitization, preventing any form of independent religious mobilization.
- **Digital Surveillance and Information Control** – Saudi and Emirati regimes monitor and suppress online religious discourse through AI-driven surveillance systems, ensuring that religious messaging aligns with state policies [4]. The UAE employs the ‘Falcon Eye’ surveillance system, which uses facial recognition and AI analytics to track digital dissent, while Saudi Arabia prosecutes online activists who challenge state-sanctioned religious interpretations. In 2022, Saudi authorities sentenced Salma al-Shehab, a Saudi PhD student at the University of Leeds to 34 years in prison for engaging with Islamist-linked content on Twitter, highlighting the extent of digital securitization in controlling religious discourse.

Regional Securitization: Exporting the Strategy through Foreign Policy

- **Interventionism Against Islamist Movements** – Gulf securitization extends beyond domestic policies into foreign interventions, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE support authoritarian leaders who suppress Islamist groups [17].
 - The UAE’s military support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya and Saudi Arabia’s financial backing of the Sisi regime in Egypt illustrates how domestic religious control is mirrored in regional interventions [D.

Butter, *Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals*, Chatham House Research Paper, London 2020, available online at https://www-chathamhouse-org.webpkgcache.com/doc/-/s/www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/CHHJ8102-Egypt-and-Gulf-RP-WEB_0.pdf. In Libya, the UAE has provided military aid, airstrikes, and logistical support to Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) as part of a broader effort to suppress Islamist factions linked to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), which had ties to the Brotherhood.

- Saudi Arabia has extended billions in financial aid to Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who overthrew the Brotherhood-led government of Mohamed Morsi in 2013, ensuring that Egypt remains aligned with Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's vision of a securitized, anti-Islamist regional order.

Securitization as a Legitimacy Strategy

The rhetoric of Gulf leaders plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of political Islam as a security threat. Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) explicitly stated, "*We will not waste 30 more years dealing with extremist ideas*", framing state-led modernization as a necessary countermeasure against radicalism [M. Chulov, *I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam, Says Crown Prince*, The Guardian, 2017, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>]. Similarly, Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) frequently emphasizes 'tolerance' as a central element of Emirati identity, while simultaneously implementing strict legal measures against Islamist opposition [M. bin Zayed, *The UAE is a Nation of Tolerance, Peace, Cultural Diversity, and Coexistence*, WAM, 1 December 2016, <https://www.wam.ae/en/article/hszr4spk-mohamed-bin-zayed-the-uae-nation-tolerance-peace>].

By securitizing political Islam, Gulf regimes not only neutralize potential opposition but also reinforce their broader narrative of state-led modernization. This allows them to frame secular authoritarianism as a necessary response to extremism, positioning their governance model as an alternative to both Islamist rule and Western-style democracy.

5.3. Strategic Alliance-Building and Regime Survival (Neoclassical Realism)

Neoclassical Realism (NCR) explains how states' foreign policies are shaped by both systemic (international) and unit-level (domestic) factors [19]. In the Gulf, domestic political imperatives—such as the need for regime security, elite cohesion, and economic sustainability—directly influence foreign policy decisions.

Foreign policy maneuvers by Gulf rulers are closely linked to domestic political survival strategies. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's consolidation of power—marked by the 2017 Ritz-Carlton purge—was accompanied by a recalibration of Riyadh's global alliances. The purge, presented as an anti-corruption campaign, involved the detention of dozens of Saudi princes,

business tycoons, and former government officials in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel. Many detainees were compelled to sign over assets, businesses, and financial holdings to the state in exchange for their release, effectively restructuring the Saudi elite and eliminating potential challengers to MBS's rule. This move not only consolidated his control over the royal family and economic resources but also signaled to foreign partners—especially the U.S. and China—that he was a decisive leader capable of enforcing stability while pushing forward his modernization agenda. Strengthening security ties with the U.S. reassured domestic elites who remained aligned with the traditional security apparatus, while energy deals with China and investment partnerships with Russia helped MBS build an alternative power base, reducing dependence on Western political backing. Similarly, in the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed's marginalization of traditional merchant elites coincided with an expansion of state-controlled economic diplomacy. The UAE's deepening defense cooperation with France and economic integration with China served as tools to reinforce MBZ's hold over internal political networks while reducing vulnerability to Western political conditionalities.

Moreover, militarization is a dual-purpose strategy, reinforcing regime legitimacy while advancing geopolitical goals. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the world's top five arms importers, using military spending and foreign interventions to maintain control [28]. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen (2015–present) is not only a means to counter Iranian influence but also an effort to bolster nationalist sentiment and justify increased military budgets. The UAE, meanwhile, has utilized paramilitary forces and private security contractors (e.g., Blackwater-linked groups) to conduct covert military operations while minimizing direct regime accountability. A notable example is the UAE's military presence in the Horn of Africa, where it has established bases in Eritrea (Assab) and Somaliland (Berbera) to project power along the Red Sea. These outposts not only enhance the UAE's strategic positioning in maritime security but also serve as platforms for supporting allied factions in regional conflicts, reinforcing Abu Dhabi's role as a key security actor in East Africa.

These internal pressures shape external engagements, leading to strategic balancing between major global powers.

Application to the Gulf Region

- **Managing Domestic Legitimacy Amid International Pressures** – Gulf regimes strategically shape their foreign policy to shield themselves from Western demands for political reforms and human rights accountability. By diversifying their diplomatic and economic partnerships, particularly through closer ties with China and Russia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE reduce their reliance on Western security guarantees. This shift limits Western leverage on issues such as political liberalization, press freedoms, and civil rights, allowing Gulf rulers to maintain authoritarian control without external interference [5]. This correlates with neoclassical realism's argument that states adjust their foreign policy based on both systemic constraints (Western pressure) and internal regime survival needs.

- **Strategic Hedging Between Great Powers** – While maintaining strong security ties with the U.S., Gulf states deepen economic and technological cooperation with China and Russia to ensure strategic autonomy [3; 29].
- **Economic Diplomacy as a Geopolitical Tool** – Gulf monarchies use foreign investment in Europe, Africa, and Asia to enhance their influence while securing long-term economic partnerships [D. Pilling, C. Cornish and A. Schipani, *The UAE's Rising Influence in Africa*, Financial Times, May 30, 2024, available online at <https://www.ft.com/content/388e1690-223f-41a8-a5f2-0c971dbfe6f0>]. For instance, in 2023, Saudi PIF increased its stake in Lucid Motors (U.S.) and Newcastle United (UK) to expand its influence in Western financial and cultural industries.
- **Energy and Digital Infrastructure as Strategic Assets** – Saudi Arabia's partnership with China's Huawei in AI and digital infrastructure strengthens its domestic surveillance capabilities while insulating it from Western scrutiny over digital authoritarianism [30].

Neoclassical Realism thus provides insight into why Gulf regimes simultaneously pursue secularization domestically while aligning with authoritarian partners internationally, reinforcing their long-term survival strategy.

5.4. Societal Responses to Secular Authoritarianism

While Gulf regimes have largely succeeded in consolidating power through economic modernization and securitization of Islam, public responses to these policies vary across different societal groups.

A. Public Acceptance and Economic Buy-in:

- Many citizens, particularly younger generations, support economic modernization efforts such as Vision 2030 and UAE's diversification strategy. The expansion of entertainment, tourism, and technological industries has generated enthusiasm among professionals and business elites, who see these reforms as opportunities for economic mobility.
- However, this acceptance does not necessarily translate into political loyalty. Surveys and social media discourse indicate skepticism about long-term state commitments to liberalization beyond economic policies [1]. Many fear that economic reforms are primarily a tool for regime survival rather than genuine socio-political change, as past liberalization efforts have been reversed when perceived as a threat to ruling elites. In Saudi Arabia, past attempts at controlled liberalization have often been reversed when they were perceived as a challenge to monarchical authority. In 2013 Saudi authorities allowed women to join the Shura Council for the first time, granting them 30 seats in the advisory body. While this was framed as a progressive reform, the council remained without legislative power, and the move served more as a symbolic gesture than a substantive step toward political inclusion.

B. Youth Discontent and Economic Uncertainty

- Empirical data further support the claim that economic modernization is central to the survival of secular authoritarian regimes in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia's youth unemployment rate stands at 28%, significantly higher than the UAE's 9%, making Vision 2030's economic initiatives crucial for domestic stability [World Bank, World Development Indicators, World Bank, 2020, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>].
- The shift toward privatization and foreign investment-led economies has also led to job insecurity, as nationals often lack the skills needed for highly specialized roles in growing industries like AI, fintech, and renewable energy.
- Public sector employment—historically a pillar of regime stability—can no longer absorb the growing labor force, forcing many young Gulf nationals into underdeveloped private sector markets with lower wages and fewer benefits.
- Many young people perceive the private sector as inaccessible, given structural barriers, nationalization quotas, and the dominance of state-linked enterprises [31]. Structural barriers include skill mismatches between Gulf education systems—often geared toward preparing students for public sector employment—and the needs of emerging industries such as technology, renewable energy, and finance. Compounding this issue, many private companies prefer to hire foreign expatriate workers, who often possess more specialized expertise and are willing to work for lower wages than Gulf nationals. Nationalization programs such as Saudization, Emiratization, and Omanization were introduced to increase local employment in the private sector. However, these initiatives have not significantly reduced youth unemployment. In many cases, firms hire Gulf nationals solely to meet quota requirements without assigning them meaningful responsibilities—a phenomenon commonly referred to as "ghost employment." Meanwhile, state-linked enterprises and public sector jobs continue to dominate the economic landscape, limiting opportunities for an independent private sector to flourish. Even in nominally privatized sectors like banking, telecommunications, and energy, major industries remain tightly connected to government-linked entities. As a result, entrepreneurship and independent business ventures face considerable regulatory and funding obstacles.

C. Digital Activism and Political Constraints

- Gulf states have expanded digital repression strategies, using cybercrime laws, AI-driven surveillance, and coordinated online propaganda to neutralize dissent [Freedom House, *Freedom in the World* 2022, available online at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule/countries-regions>; Human Rights Watch,

World Report 2021, available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021>].

- Saudi Arabia's sentencing of Salma al-Shehab to 34 years in prison for Twitter posts illustrates the state's increasing focus on criminalizing digital activism [*Saudi Arabia: Woman Sentenced to 34 Years for Tweets*, Human Rights Watch, August 19, 2022, available online at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/19/saudi-arabia-woman-sentenced-34-years-tweets>]. Similarly, the UAE has introduced strict cybercrime laws that criminalize digital dissent, with broad provisions against 'harming national unity' or 'insulting state institutions'.
- Advanced AI-driven surveillance systems, such as Saudi Arabia's Neom City facial recognition project and the UAE's Falcon Eye monitoring system, allow regimes to track, predict, and neutralize political dissent before it escalates (digital authoritarianism).
- Gulf monarchies also use social media manipulation—including state-backed bot networks—to shape public perception, discredit activists, and reinforce pro-government narratives. For example, during the fallout of the Jamal Khashoggi murder, a network of bots generated millions of pro-Saudi tweets to justify the regime's actions. Tweets emphasized statements from Saudi authorities denying the involvement of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Example Tweet: "The Saudi leadership did not know about this incident. Justice will be served against those responsible." Targeting Western Hypocrisy: Many tweets accused Western countries of holding double standards regarding human rights abuses, deflecting attention from Saudi actions. Example Tweet: "Why single out Saudi Arabia when other nations violate human rights daily? Look at the wars waged by Western powers" [32].

D. Religious Scholars and Clerical Resistance:

- Some traditionalist clerics have expressed concern over the erosion of religious authority, particularly in Saudi Arabia where government-controlled religious institutions increasingly promote state narratives [International Crisis Group, *Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy*, Middle East Briefing, January 2024, available online at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/saudi-arabia/understanding-saudi-arabias>]. The shift toward state-aligned religious discourse has led to a decline in clerical autonomy, with many scholars either co-opted into the system or marginalized. This has also triggered frustration among conservative segments of society who perceive these changes as a dilution of Islamic principles in favor of state-driven pragmatism
- The crackdown on independent scholars, such as Salman al-Ouda—a prominent Saudi cleric and reformist known for his advocacy of political reform and moderate Islam—highlights growing tensions between the state and religious establishment, as some clerics seek to challenge government discourse on Islamic values [*Saudi Arabia:*

Woman Sentenced to 34 Years for Tweets, Human Rights Watch, August 19, 2022, available online at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/19/saudi-arabia-woman-sentenced-34-years-tweets>. By silencing dissenting voices, Gulf regimes aim to preemptively curb any potential mobilization that could emerge from religious circles. However, this suppression risks creating an underground network of clerics and followers who may turn to alternative, and potentially more radical, platforms to express their grievances.

By considering societal responses, it becomes evident that secular authoritarianism in the Gulf is not a monolithic process but one that faces both passive acceptance and pockets of resistance within domestic and international communities.

E. Structural Contradictions and Long-term Vulnerabilities

While secular authoritarianism in the Gulf has proven effective in maintaining regime stability in the short to medium term, it is not without internal contradictions that may undermine its long-term viability. A key tension lies in the promotion of rapid economic modernization and secular consumer culture alongside continued political repression and suppression of dissent. As Gulf regimes invest in futuristic megaprojects, global cultural events, and high-tech sectors, they foster a new class of globally connected, educated youth whose aspirations often outpace the political space offered by authoritarian systems [33]. This mismatch risks producing a frustrated population segment, particularly as public sector employment contracts and competition in the private sector intensifies [34].

Cultural contradictions further exacerbate this challenge. The state-sponsored embrace of hypermodern secular lifestyles—characterized by gender-mixed concerts, cinematic liberalization, or luxury consumerism—can generate backlash among conservative segments of society, who perceive these reforms as a betrayal of religious and traditional values [35]. The resulting tension between the state's secularizing agenda and societal expectations creates a fragile ideological balance that could be destabilized by sudden shocks or policy reversals.

Additionally, the securitization of religious discourse, while effective in neutralizing political Islam, risks eliminating moderate clerical voices that have historically served as a buffer against extremism [36]. By criminalizing dissent and narrowing the space for independent religious expression, Gulf regimes may inadvertently push marginalized groups into underground or transnational networks, increasing the risk of radicalization and long-term instability [37].

Finally, the dependency on state-led economic transformation and external investment introduces vulnerabilities tied to fluctuations in global markets, geopolitical shifts, and technological disruptions. The regimes' reliance on state control over reform processes also limits innovation and reduces societal ownership of change, potentially undermining the legitimacy of modernization efforts [38].

Taken together, these contradictions highlight that while secular authoritarianism offers short-term regime consolidation, it may struggle to adapt to the evolving demands of increasingly complex, digitally connected, and demographically youthful societies. These tensions warrant close monitoring, particularly as the post-oil transition accelerates.

6. Conclusion

The findings illustrate that secular authoritarianism in the Gulf is not a transitional phase, but a deeply embedded governance model, integrating:

- Economic modernization as a substitute for democratization (Authoritarian Resilience Theory)
- The securitization of political Islam to justify state control (Securitization Theory)
- Strategic multipolar engagement to maximize regime security (Neoclassical Realism)

This study demonstrates that secularization in the Gulf is not aimed at democratization but rather at consolidating authoritarian rule through economic incentives, religious control, and geopolitical alignment.

While this model has been highly effective in the short term, its long-term viability remains uncertain, given:

1. Generational shifts and youth demands for political participation
2. Economic risks associated with overreliance on state-led modernization
3. Geopolitical uncertainties in the U.S.-China-Gulf relationship

While this study has examined the mechanisms of secular authoritarianism in the Gulf, several emerging trends warrant further investigation. Future research should explore whether Gulf regimes can sustain economic liberalization without democratization and how regional actors might adapt to shifting global power dynamics.

By applying Authoritarian Resilience Theory, Securitization Theory, and Neoclassical Realism, this study provides a holistic framework for understanding the evolution of secular authoritarianism in the Persian Gulf.

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