Marriage in the Gulf States after the Arab Uprisings
The Effects of Counterrevolutionary Subsidies

Randall Kuhn
Since its founding in 1866, the American University of Beirut (AUB) has stood as a flagship institution of higher learning in the Middle East, bringing the American tradition of liberal arts education to the region. With nearly 800 faculty members and approximately 8,000 students, it is comparable in size and outlook to the University of Denver (DU)—another student-focused research university with a strong regional reputation.

2015 marked the inaugural year for a new partnership intended to connect these two institutions: a unique initiative sparked by the generosity of two University of Denver donors, and intended to foster closer ties of understanding and collaboration between one of the premier universities of the Rocky Mountain region and one of the premier universities of the Middle East. This initiative embodies the University of Denver’s commitment to internationalization, enshrined in its Impact 2025 Strategic Plan (http://imagine.du.edu/du-impact-2025/).

This collaboration between DU and AUB currently provides for annual academic faculty exchanges between the two universities, designed as short-term scholar-in-residency programs that permit the visiting scholar to connect with students and faculty through public talks, classroom visits, informal meetings with faculty and students, and time for research. In September 2015, Randall Kuhn, Associate Professor at DU’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies and Director of its Global Health Affairs Program (as well as an affiliate of the Center for Middle East Studies), served as the University of Denver’s inaugural visiting scholar to the AUB, where he was hosted by the university’s well-known Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. While there, he delivered the talk on which this occasional paper is based.

Kuhn’s paper addresses the important issue of why the Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 erupted when they did. His focus on the “retreat from marriage” in the Gulf states—the unwilling delay of marriage until the late 20s or even early 30s—helps complicate the simplistic notions advanced to explain the uprisings: persistently high unemployment, several years of drought, an overabundance of young people, etc. In Kuhn’s analysis, which is data-rich and supported with evidence from across the region, the primary challenge of the autocratic regimes of the region has been that of meeting the rising expectations of their populations. Having purchased their legitimacy through the provision of programs and services intended to support basic development, their increasingly sophisticated populations expect commensurately more substantial support from their governments. It is these governments’ failure to meet those expectations, Kuhn argues, that has underpinned much of the impetus for the uprisings.

Marriage is a critical lens through which to view this issue, because it signals the shift from late childhood to full adulthood in most Middle Eastern societies. It enables men and women to form a household of their own, with the decision-making and financial independence that this implies. And it permits the second key sign of adulthood: having children of one’s own. Recognizing the social importance of marriage, Kuhn suggests, helps explain why Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar responded to the initial uprisings by offering new or larger cash subsidies to their citizens.
These subsidies have been misunderstood as either generic rent payments or efforts to distract citizens with increased purchasing power. Rather, Kuhn argues, we can see a direct connection between the subsidies and the “marriage spike” in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait—a spike that disappeared when the subsidies ended. To better understand what prompted the last wave of uprisings and what may predict the next one, we need to look beyond simple economic explanations and recognize a more complex interplay between economic and social structures.

Kuhn’s work on populations and health is already well regarded in the United States and abroad. By delivering this talk in Beirut Kuhn had the opportunity to engage with an audience for whom these questions are more than academic. This is an important research project, offering contentious but compelling conclusions for those who study—or actually lived—the 2011-2012 uprisings. We are delighted that Kuhn could present it to a regional audience, and grateful to him for agreeing to publish the written version in this occasional paper.

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In 2012, I published an essay in *Population and Development Review* entitled “On the Role of Human Development in the Arab Spring” (Kuhn 2011). In it I proposed the somewhat controversial argument that decades of region-wide human development progress, largely carried out by despotic regimes, had led to a ratcheting up of popular expectations and aspirations over the course of a generation. Autocratic regimes that had once based their tenuous legitimacy on their ability to deliver basic development progress were now increasingly overmatched by complex new development challenges, giving rise to a rupture in the social contract and a collective outpouring of disapproval. The crisis of rising and unmet expectations could not explain the exact timing or nature of the revolutionary moments, but it could help to explain the impetus towards political change across the region. And it was an important supplement to the more common notion that the Arab Spring was driven simply by a number of bad conditions—jobs, crops, housing, too many young men, what have you.

The shift I described was best embodied by the experiences of a rising cohort of young people born in the 1980s and 1990s. These cohorts were the most direct beneficiaries of the surge in human development progress, and shared a collective experience of progress and opportunity that could also be seen in the rise of a pan-Arab social and mass media space focused in large part on the needs and tastes of this generation. Yet what should have been a golden generation akin to the Baby Boomers of the US and Europe instead became a seemingly lost generation. The term “waithood” was coined to characterize a life-stage, not quite child but not quite adult, in which youth were trapped between the aspiration for quality jobs and modern marriages and the reality that neither could be achieved (Singerman 2007). While the term sounds bad, waithood can also be understood as an expression of optimism given that, in many other places at many other times, people faced with limited prospects had simply settled for informal employment, inadequate housing and less-than-ideal marriages.

The starkest example of rising and unmet expectations came in the retreat from marriage observed across the region, but most clearly in the nations of the Maghreb, as shown in Figure 1 (Rashad and Osman 2001, Tabutin and Schoumaker 2005). In Tunisia, for example, the mean age at marriage rose for women from 21 in 1966 to 29 in 2001, and for men from 27 to 33. Delayed marriage emerged as both cause and consequence of parallel crises in employment and housing. Finding a better marriage required that people wait longer to find a good job, accumulate savings, and find the right match, but the jobs often didn’t emerge, making people less and less marriageable. For women in more traditional societies like Egypt, employment was both necessary to cover marriage costs and a factor in raising the costs for her to marry (Amin and Basussi 2004). If waithood is a harbinger of political change, then declining marriage and the rising age of marriage is its single clearest marker. Marriage matters not as a mere proxy for other development factors, but as the single most important life outcome for a young person, the culmination of adolescence, and the apparent golden ticket to a stable position in society.
(Amin and Basussi 2004). This is most obvious for women, whose status is dependent on reproduction, which can only take place within marriage. Unlike in western countries, there is no tradition of female spinsterhood, and little history for males either, who may draw social position and valuable connections through the process of marriage. As such, the marriage crisis itself not only reflects the accumulated failures of states to achieve full employment and housing, but also their failure to promote a set of values that tolerates the unmarried, along with a range of others living alternative lifestyles.

In this brief I look not at the countries like Tunisia and Egypt that experienced changes of government, but rather at the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that managed to avert popular revolts through a combination of economic subsidies aimed at placating the population and increased political control. In 2011, Steffen Hertog noted that economic subsidies aimed at averting revolution could have the opposite effect: “expectations are easy to raise but difficult to curb, creating a ratchet effect that demands ever larger outlays during every political crisis” (Hertog 2011). GCC states have typically had higher marriage rates and younger marriage ages than other Arab states, due in large part to the distribution of oil wealth into direct marriage subsidies and indirect subsidies through employment and housing markets (Rashad and Osman 2001). Yet recent years have seen a gradual decline in marriage rates accompanied by what appears to be an inflationary bubble in the cost of weddings (Fenton 2013, Salem 2013). In this context, we might expect subsidies provided by GCC states to have an immediate impact in increasing marriage rates, whether due to the allocation of subsidies directly into things like marriage and housing, or to the funneling of cash transfers into marriage costs. But if marriage rates are truly on an inexorable decline, then we would expect to see rates quickly return to their downward trend as subsidies pass through the system. If a ratchet effect were already unfolding, we might even see an upward marriage spike followed by further catch-up decline or even a shift to a more radically downward trend.

Before presenting patterns of marriage in the GCC states, I provide a bit of background on the significance and measurement of marriage. I then describe the nature of the Arab Spring subsidies in GCC states, which vary to a surprising extent. Finally, I present the marriage trends.
Short-term indicators of marriage

In spite of the significance of marriage, data on marriage are notoriously sparse in most countries relative to other demographic variables like birth and death. The most widely-used measure of the pace of marriage, the singulate mean age of marriage (SMAM), is based on the current marital outcomes of an entire population, and so it varies quite little from year to year. Crude marriage rate (CMR), or the number of new marriages divided by total population, is an unreliable indicator over the long-term because it is so dependent on the age composition of a population, but it may better capture short-term changes in marriage behavior.

Unfortunately, the real-time tracking of new marriages is beyond the capabilities of most national data systems. Marriage typically falls under the jurisdiction of religious or judicial authorities rather than statistical or public health agencies, and so coverage tends to be generally poor and there may be limited interest in coding marriage documents for analysis. Marriage often goes underreported in settings where traditional and official marriage definitions do not overlap. The GCC states also face a fairly unique problem of expatriate marriages, which are subject to different and rapidly-evolving rules that affect male and female nationals differently.

Real-time estimation of age of marriage is an even greater challenge. Religious or judicial marriage documents may fail to collect age data. There may also be gross incentives both to overestimate age (for instance to skirt minimum age laws) or to underestimate age (especially in societies with traditions of early marriage). Real-time estimation of age at marriage is only truly possible where marriage registration occurs as part of a comprehensive vital registration system that includes the tracking of age. Fortunately there has been a global push, especially in emerging states, to adopt vital registration systems.

In spite of their apparent social, economic and cultural similarities, the GCC states are extraordinarily heterogeneous in terms of the quality of marriage data. In Bahrain, a Central Informatics Organization has maintained a highly-integrated vital registration system with public reporting of data back to 1985, meaning that recent marriages are not only tracked in real time by statistical agencies, but are accompanied by precise dates of birth. Qatar’s Statistics Authority has also maintained integrated vital registration since 1982, but electronic records exist only back to 2000. In Kuwait, marriage data are collected by the Ministry of Justice, but linkage to a national identification system facilitates estimation of age and nationality of marriage partners. Marriage data in the United Arab Emirates reflect their hybrid political system, with marriage data coming from integrated vital registration in Abu Dhabi, but a less developed statistical system in Dubai. In other Emirates, however, reporting is conducted by the Ministry of Justice and has been subject to changing rules for tracking of expatriate marriages. In Oman, the National Center for Statistics and Information aggregates and publishes marriage certificate data, but does not conduct registration. Each of these five smaller nations makes data publicly available to some extent, though the years of coverage, available data series, and means of acquisition (data engine, downloadable spreadsheets, Acrobat files) remain highly variable in all but Bahrain.

Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia, the largest and most politically significant member of the GCC, is considerably behind its fellow member states in a number of ways. There is no vital registration of any kind. Marriage certificates are maintained and reported by the Ministry of Justice, which tracks marriages according to the Islamic calendar and thus don’t align with population estimates constructed for western calendars. Rules for documentation of expatriate marriages change regularly. There is no reporting of age or nationality. As a result, it is not possible to include Saudi data in the current analysis.

The Arab Spring Stimulus Packages

Shortly after the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, all of the GCC states introduced subsidy programs, due both to a powerful copycat effect and to some coordination through the GCC itself (Ulrichsen
2013). But the size and distribution method of these subsidies varies considerably. As in most contexts, one-off stimulus programs may have displaced other government expenditures. In the context of high oil prices and profligate social welfare states, the annual trend in increased spending may dominate the one-off stimulus, making it difficult to even spot the presence of a stimulus in national accounts data. Nonetheless, we can begin to qualitatively characterize the magnitude of stimulus based on a combination of stated values and deviations from preexisting expenditure trends.

The qualitative assessment of stimulus size presented in Table 1 illustrates a clear pattern of variation in stimulus magnitude, with far higher levels of stimulus in the three states – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman – that were relatively less wealthy and have a much larger share of local nationals in their populations. Each offered packages amounting to between 4% and 6% of GDP. These packages largely focused on public sector job creation. The Bahraini and Omani stimulus packages were largely financed by Saudi Arabia.

Among the richer states, Qatar offered a moderately large stimulus of 2–4% of GDP, even though there was little threat of domestic unrest. Although Kuwait was the first Gulf state to announce its $4 billion stimulus package just days after the fall of the Tunisian government, the size of the stimulus remained relatively small, at around 1% of GDP. Finally, the stimulus package in the UAE was exceptionally small, especially when set against persistent annual spending increases of 20–30% annually. These subsidies focused largely on provision of direct services to poorer emirates like Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. In Dubai and Abu Dhabi there was little popular expression of dissent and little stimulus offered.

| Table 1: Qualitative estimates of the Gulf Cooperation Council Arab Spring stimulus packages |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | Saudi Arabia    | U.A.E.          | Qatar           | Kuwait          | Oman            | Bahrain         |
| Pop (millions)  | 31.5            | 9.2             | 2.2             | 3.9             | 4.5             | 1.4             |
| % National      | 66%             | 12%             | 12%             | 31%             | 53%             | 46%             |
| Stimulus        | Large: 4–6% of GDP/yr | Tiny: <1% of GDP/yr | Medium: 2–4% of GDP/yr | Small: ~1% of GDP/yr | Large: ~8% of GDP/yr | Large: 4–6% of GDP/yr |

**Marriage Trends in the GCC**

Figure 2 tracks the crude marriage rates for local nationals for three GCC states with high quality data systems and significant economic stimulus: Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. To avoid any confounding effects of changes in registration of expatriate marriage, the results focus exclusively on marriages between two local nationals. The three nations share notably similar marriage patterns. Crude marriage rates had declined about 20% from their peak levels in the run-up to the Arab Spring. In 2011, the year of the stimulus, these trends reversed as marriage rates spiked considerably. In Bahrain, CMR rose from 7.0 marriages per 1,000 population in 2010 to 8.2 in 2011, an increase of roughly 18%. In Kuwait, CMR rose from 7.8 to 8.8. In Qatar, the absolute increase was smaller (from 7.3 to 7.8), but the impact was more comparable when we consider that the trend toward declining marriage in Qatar was much more negative.

As the stimulus passed, all three of these countries also saw a return to declining marriage in the most recent reporting year, though it is difficult to tell whether this is a clear return to the earlier declining trend. Bahrain, which has the highest quality data and the only data for 2014, provides further clear evidence. Marriage rates declined in both 2013 and 2014, largely erasing the marriage spike of 2011 and 2012, though not returning Bahrain to the earlier trend.

The rich detail of Bahrain’s vital registration also makes clear that the 2011/12 marriage spike was driven by a temporary drop in the age of marriage, disrupting the trend towards increased age at marriage (Figure 3). In 2011
the mean of spouses in reported new marriages dropped by about ½ year for both men and women, after years of sustained increase.¹ This proved to be a blip, however, as marriage age continued their precipitous rise in 2012-14.²

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¹ Note that the age of new marriages can decline either because more young people are getting married or because fewer old people are getting married. I tested this by restricting the estimates to just include younger people, and the results persisted.

² A small amount of this rise was the natural rebound effect whereby young people who accelerated their marriages in 2011 were not getting married in later years, but this effect explains only a small portion of the rebound.
In Figure 4, we see that Dubai and Abu Dhabi, which saw a minimal stimulus during the uprisings, saw a continued trend of declining marriage without any interruption in 2011/12. By 2013, crude marriage rates in Abu Dhabi and Dubai were about 20% lower than they had been in 2009. By contrast, the stimulus allowed Kuwait and Bahrain to maintain about the same marriage rates in 2013 as in 2009, with Qatar seeing only a minimal 5% decline.

![Figure 4: Crude rate of marriages between local nationals Dubai and Abu Dhabi, 2005-2013](http://www.uaestatistics.gov.ae/EnglishHome/tabid/96/Default.aspx)


Conclusion

In the five years since the Arab uprisings, the retreat from marriage in the GCC states has largely persisted. Recent data from vital registration systems suggest that rates of marriage are highly responsive to government subsidies like those handed out after the uprisings, as evidenced by the 2011 marriage spike in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, the drop in age of marriage in Bahrain in 2011, and the uninterrupted decline in marriage in the UAE, where subsidies were minimal. These effects were short-lived, however, and affected countries quickly returned to their old pattern of decline. The effects of subsidies could have been worse. We might have observed the emergence of an inflationary bubble whereby subsidies caused a permanent spike in the cost of marriage, thereby pushing marriage towards an even more negative trend. Nevertheless, the retreat of marriage is a very real phenomenon that cannot be easily disrupted.

The decline of marriage in the GCC states does not in itself portend to any long-term societal challenges or revolutionary risks. Indeed the UAE government seems largely sanguine about this process. As noted at the outset, the real threat to the social contract comes from the long-term inability for states to help citizens achieve their rising aspirations. In Western nations and increasingly in East Asia, careers and extrahimal social networks offer alternative pathways to economic, social and political inclusion in the absence of marriage. In that light, the potential crisis facing GCC states lies in the persistent societal burdens imposed on those who cannot get married and the social and economic opportunities for new families who have waited so long to get married. While some public discourse has focused on the crisis facing unmarried men who supposedly may grow restive or even violent, it is worth noting that men have outlets for coping with the marriage crisis, including expatriate marriage, emigration, and a somewhat longer tradition of bachelor males. For women, the burdens of spinsterhood are both harsh and largely unavoidable. Whereas declining marriage tracks to a rise in women’s schooling, it does not track to a substantial rise in women’s employment.
Declining rates of marriage would be cause for concern in a vacuum, but are potentially more troubling in the context of ongoing economic challenges facing the GCC states. Falling oil prices make it difficult for states even to maintain the extraordinarily high rates of public spending established during the last oil boom, much less extend the state even more to provide further subsidies. These challenges are most notable in Bahrain and Oman, where declining oil reserves left them dependent on other GCC states even to finance the initial Arab Spring subsidies. Employment markets in every GCC state, with the possible exception of Dubai, remain shallow and highly dependent on expatriate labor.

Perhaps the silver lining to the potential dark cloud of unmet aspirations is that GCC states should by now be well aware that subsidies are unlikely to offer a viable long-term option for maintaining stability. Whether they merely delay the inevitable crisis of aspirations or actually exacerbate it, subsidies do not work. GCC states, like their less wealthy counterpart states throughout the region, may soon be free to set about the arduous process of reforming labor markets, gender and family norms, and other social systems that underpin the development process.

About the Author

Randall Kuhn (Ph.D., Demography and Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, 1999) is Director of the Global Health Affairs Program and Associate Professor at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies, where he is also an affiliate of the Center for Middle East Studies. He is a Research Associate of the Institute of Behavioral Science and the Center for Asian Studies at University of Colorado-Boulder. He brings a wide array of research methods and data sources to bear on studying the connections between health, population and development over time and at multiple scales of analysis. In Bangladesh, he leads a 35-year evaluation of the effects of randomized child and reproductive health interventions on health and socioeconomic change across generations. His cross-national research explores the effectiveness of global health policies and the role of improvements in health as a driver of social and political change. Kuhn’s methodological expertise includes longitudinal data analysis, experimental and quasi-experimental research design, statistical matching, and novel uses of administrative data. Kuhn is the founder of the Goal 18 campaign for inclusive UN Sustainable Development Goals.


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