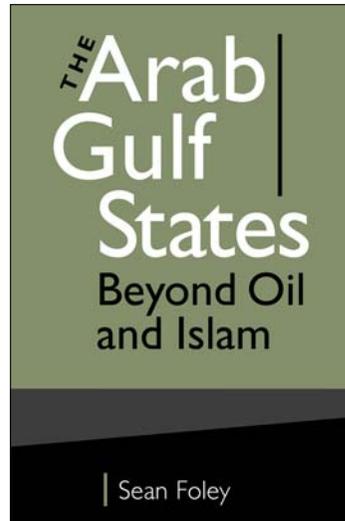


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# The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam

Sean Foley

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# 1

## Introduction

*My father rode a camel. I ride a Cadillac. My son flies a jet. My grandson will have a supersonic plane. But my great-grandson . . . will be a camel driver.*

—Arab Gulf saying, 1980

*I'm from Najran city [in Saudi Arabia], and there are still some houses [that] my father tells me belonged to the Jews who used to live in Najran. The Jews migrated to Israel during the 1950s. My father tells me that they used to live in peace with the rest of the people in Najran.*

—An anonymous Saudi, 2007

In 2002, I was in Damascus, Syria, researching the life of a leading nineteenth-century Sufi saint and scholar, Shaikh Khalid Naqshbandi. One day I was invited to visit the home of Shaikh Nazim al-Qubrusi, the most important contemporary figure in Shaikh Khalid's Sufi order, the Naqshbandiyya. When I arrived at the home, I was introduced to the shaikh, who asked me in Arabic about my work on Shaikh Khalid. After we spoke for a few minutes, Nazim switched to English, explaining that it was the only language that everyone present could understand, since some of his followers were Asian Muslims or Western converts to Islam. As Nazim spoke, I noticed that one of his followers was videotaping my conversation with him—to be posted, as I later learned, on YouTube and on his website.<sup>1</sup>

After my conversation with Nazim, I was besieged by several men who attempted to sit next to me, touch my back or arms, or even put their arms around my shoulders. At first, I assumed that the men were enthusiastic fol-

lowers of Nazim who were displaying Arab social norms, since in Arab societies, from Morocco to Kuwait, heterosexual men engage in far more direct physical interaction than their US counterparts. But when one of the men asked if Nazim had touched my backpack, I understood what was happening: the men believed that Shaikh Nazim—like Shaikh Khalid before him—was a Muslim saint who could confer *baraka*, or blessings from God, onto anyone who interacted with him. By touching me or anything else that had made contact with Nazim, including my bag, they believed that they could benefit from the *baraka* that God conferred to humanity through Nazim.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after my encounter with Shaikh Nazim and his followers, I, too, was seemingly touched by Nazim's *baraka*. It happened at a newsstand in London's Heathrow International Airport. I would normally have gone straight for the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*, but another magazine caught my attention, the *National Geographic*. The cover was of a senior Saudi prince performing his kingdom's national dance, the *ardha* sword dance, to conclude a camel festival. Its caption read "Kingdom on Edge: Saudi Arabia." Even though I had lived close to the magazine's offices in Washington, DC, when I was in graduate school, I had not read or even looked at *National Geographic* since I was in fifth grade. Had I not stopped at the newsstand at Heathrow, it is unlikely that I would have ever seen that particular issue.<sup>3</sup>

But the magazine caught my attention and held it. The cover highlighted Frank Viviano's article on Saudi Arabia and discussed his recent trip there; it included interviews and photographs of both Saudis and non-Saudis from all walks of life. Men, women (both veiled and unveiled), young, old, commoners, and members of the royal family appeared in rural, urban, public, and intimate settings. There were pictures of things anyone would expect to see: oil fields, deserts, enormous mosques, and palaces. But there were also pictures of things few would expect to see: a family watching Fox News, the crowded and dilapidated homes of foreign laborers, female university students, and a man sporting a colorful Che Guevara T-shirt and jeans rather than the *dish-dasha*, the white full-length garment traditionally worn by Saudi men.

As I returned to the article again and again over the following weeks, I was struck by the contrast between the diverse modern society that appeared in Viviano's photographs and the conservative Arab Muslim society that I had found in my reading on Saudi Arabia and its neighbors in my classes at Berkeley and Georgetown. An especially surprising example of Saudi diversity was the name of the family watching Fox News—Naqshbandi—because Shaikh Nazim and the Naqshbandiyya advocate a vision of Islam that is hostile to Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. Indeed, adherents to the Naqshbandiyya have reportedly been persecuted in the kingdom,<sup>4</sup> yet the Naqshbandis were presented as a typical Saudi family. They lived in Jeddah, which resembles cities in other parts of the world, with their countless automobiles and traffic congestion, office buildings, mass-produced

consumer goods, and low-rise suburban houses. One nighttime picture of the Saudi capital, Riyadh, could easily have been mistaken for Phoenix or Las Vegas.

Equally striking to me was how much Viviano's portrayal of traditional modes of authority undermined the current chief intellectual tool for understanding Gulf states, the rentier model. The rentier model emerged to explain the oil-funded socioeconomic transformation of Iran and what would become the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It by and large ignores traditional modes of authority, such as sword dances at the end of tribal camel festivals, *majlises* (councils in which politicians field requests from ordinary Saudis), direct payments to Saudis in need, and tribal levies guarding vast expanses of desert.

These six states had progressed from poor and isolated communities into wealthy and technologically advanced nations during the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars saw these states, which had tiny indigenous populations and strong monarchies, as so exceptional that they deserved a new scholarly model—the rentier model. In particular, scholars focused on the state monopolies over the fees, or “rents,” that foreigners paid for the right to extract oil from the Gulf nations. Scholars argued that these rents permitted monarchs in the Gulf to acquire the resources necessary to govern as police states without taxing their subjects or negotiating with the rest of society, as their counterparts must do in countries without oil. Within the rentier framework, the autonomy of a government vis-à-vis its population correlates to external rents from oil: the greater the revenues from these external rents, the greater the autonomy, and vice versa. If oil revenues decline, rentier governments must make significant concessions to their populations in order to remain in power.<sup>5</sup> The rentier model and oil have even been used to explain patriarchal structures in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

Yet events in recent years, as well as statistics compiled by the United Nations, appear to validate Viviano's article and to undermine the rentier model in two key ways. First, most Gulf governments lack one critical element of a police state: robust police.<sup>7</sup> The number of internal security forces per 100,000 residents in most Gulf states is analogous to that of Portugal, Brazil, and Israel—none of which are seen as autocratic police states.<sup>8</sup> Second, although the price of oil and revenues from oil sales increased with breakneck speed between 1999 and the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, the opposite of what the rentier model predicts has occurred. That is, governments held elections and permitted groups outside of their elites—including women, Shia, foreigners, and religious and secular opposition groups—to take a far more visible public role than before. In June 2008, for instance, Bahrain appointed a Jewish woman to serve as its ambassador to the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Together, these policies suggest that there is more to the politics of these states than oil, and they raise a host of larger questions. To begin with, could

the absence of police and other internal security forces tell us something important about the nature of political power and legitimacy in the Gulf? Might the nature of power in the Gulf resemble that of other states that are not rich in oil? Does the diversity of people and workers in the Gulf suggest that discussions of politics and economics in the region require us to consider a host of peoples and traditions besides conservative Sunni Arabs? What about the role of women, especially educated women? Finally, what does the accessibility of Fox and other foreign media mean for the ability of Gulf governments to shape public opinion and to control their own media—both of which are hallmarks of authoritarian police states?

\* \* \*

In this book, I address these questions in a new way. My analysis is based on four core themes.

First, I treat the six GCC countries as normal states that face many of the same social, religious, and economic problems as other states over the past century.

Second, I argue that many of the critical challenges that Gulf states face in the twenty-first century (religious tensions, the role of gender, and existential questions of identity) predate the discovery of oil in 1930 and reflect centuries-old social and cultural factors in the Gulf. Among the most important of these factors are tribal and local customs, patron-client relationships, commercial networks, the hajj, geographic and environmental constraints, familial traditions of governance, and religious and cultural tolerance. These factors, unlike oil, help us to explain, for example, the homosexual practices that F. P. Mackie identified in his 1940 report on Saudi public health; they also suggest why a mass circulation Saudi newspaper regularly publishes schedules for satellite television programs and employs an openly gay Saudi journalist, even though both satellite television and homosexuality are officially illegal in the kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

The record of tolerance in Gulf societies points to my third core argument: we cannot fully understand either past or contemporary realities in the Gulf unless we come to terms with its diversity and investigate the roles of Arab Sunni Muslim men *along with* those of women, non-Arabs, and non-Muslims. Although these last three groups are excluded from regional histories or treated as collective powerless “others” in contemporary political analysis, they have made and continue to make tangible contributions to Gulf societies. Over the past century, women, Western diplomats, Catholic and Protestant Christians, Jews, South Asians, oil company executives, Asian laborers, Shia, overseas investors, and countless others have shaped regional commerce, comforted the sick, inspired political action, educated thousands, and led soldiers into battle. Regional leaders have worked closely with these communities, granted them autonomy, and, at times, adopted them as groups that deserve the protection of

the state. Gulf leaders have often provided land and funds for them to construct churches and because of this have been awarded prestigious papal honors usually given to active Catholic laymen, including knighthood in the Order of Pius and the grand cross of the Order of Saint Sylvester.<sup>11</sup>

Another important component of Gulf life and society is the impact of technological change—and this is my fourth core argument. Radio, television, air conditioning, desalinization, satellite broadcasting, the Internet, and cell phones have had at least as important an effect as oil on daily life and on politics in the Gulf. These technological advances have permitted Gulf Arabs to build communities modeled on postwar US suburbs, increase foreign and native populations, and achieve rapid economic growth. Technology has also forced them and others to face a series of cultural, environmental, and political questions that are as difficult to resolve in the twenty-first century as they were in the 1930s, when both radio and the oil industry first appeared in the Gulf. The seriousness of these problems is encapsulated by the fact that, in the 1970s, Gulf Arabs seriously believed that it was possible (in fact, likely) that their descendants would live as Bedouin Arabs—despite the fact that Gulf societies were the wealthiest and most technologically advanced nations on earth at the time.

To support these arguments, I draw on a broad base of primary and secondary sources in Arabic and English: diplomatic correspondence, regional newspapers, poetry, movies, television programs, personal interviews, memoirs, missionary records, and web blogs and other Internet-related materials. I also draw on the records housed in several archives. Georgetown University's William Mulligan Collection is an especially valuable source, since it includes hundreds of classified reports by the employees of the Arab-American Oil Company on virtually every aspect of life in the Gulf, from the books sold in bookstores to the internal politics of royal families. Of particular interest are Phebe Marr's reports on girls and education during a key period for Saudi women—the 1960s—when education was first offered to girls throughout the kingdom.

Another group of sources I use includes the first feature-length Saudi Arabian movie, *Keif al-Hal?* (How Are You?); YouTube videos; and Ahmed al-Omran and other leading Gulf bloggers. These types of popular and alternative media provide information on Gulf society that is not present in other sources and have become an important and controversial outlet for political debate—so controversial that some Gulf governments have imprisoned bloggers and sought to censor the online content.<sup>12</sup>

\* \* \*

My argument is presented in the six chapters that follow. Chapter 2, which charts the history and politics of the Gulf states from the 1920s until the late

1970s, shows how Gulf rulers drew on their families' tradition of governance dating back to the nineteenth century to maintain their authority and to repel rhetorical attacks from Arab nationalists. Rulers reinforced their legitimacy by cultivating various social networks and by promoting Islamic and tribal values. In mosques, sword dances, *majlises*, markets, hajj pilgrimage speeches, royal visits to provincial cities, and welfare institutions, monarchs interacted with ordinary subjects and were thereby confirmed as leaders.

Many rulers further reinforced their authority through a system analogous to a welfare state in which individual subjects and tribes received generous cash subsidies, food, and clothing. Rulers also leveraged their international position and importance to Great Britain, the United States, and South Asian Muslims to win assistance and funds akin to the rents they would later receive from oil. In fact, Saudi Arabia's dependence in the 1930s on the annual fees paid by hajj pilgrims strongly resembled the kingdom's later dependence on the proceeds from the sale of oil.

Although I discuss the importance of oil in Chapter 2, I also argue that the success of the Gulf rulers should be compared to the records of monarchs and presidents elsewhere in the Middle East, who also had access to vast oil revenues but could not maintain political stability. I emphasize several factors that are generally overlooked by historians of this period: the role of the hajj in US-Saudi relations, the importance of air conditioning, the impact of US missionary hospitals and schools, and Jewish and South Asian dominance of Gulf commerce between 1900 and the 1950s. In addition, I stress the importance of radio and other mass media, which took root in the 1930s and were, by the 1960s, as much an aspect of daily life in the region as the call to prayer and Quran readings. The Gulf states treated the mass media as an aspect of sovereignty and competed fiercely with one another, as well as with Western oil companies, Arab nationalists, and regional US military bases, over stations and channels. The result was that Arabs in the Gulf—much like East Germans during the Cold War—had access to broadcasts in their native language from terrestrial radio and television stations based in neighboring states. Although regional governments heavily censored domestic radio and television content whenever they could, they did not in fact control everything that was broadcast within their national borders. Instead, they were forced to compete for domestic audiences, which overwhelmingly preferred foreign television and radio broadcasts.

Chapter 3 explores the nexus of political events, economic factors, and new forms of media that appeared in the Gulf from the Iranian revolution in 1979 until the year 2000. This nexus fundamentally altered which foreign and domestic groups could demand access to state resources; it also ensured that government decisions respected the interests and views of those groups. The new media—foreign and Gulf-based—pursued their own agendas and were sometimes funded by governments and organizations that differed consider-

ably from those of other Gulf states. They gave a platform to dissident voices and employed Arabic-speaking journalists who could follow their own inclinations. Unlike Western journalists, Arab journalists did not depend on guides and translators. If that meant interviewing Bin Laden or covering anti-US protests in Bahrain, the stories went on the air.

In Chapter 4 I discuss strategies that Gulf states have undertaken since 2000 to address the growing imbalances in their societies and to take advantage of the steep increases in the price of oil from 1999 until mid-2008. From the start, many of these policies produced unintended socioeconomic and political outcomes, some of which undermined the stability of the GCC societies. Although the decision of the Gulf states to maintain close ties with the United States may have deterred Iran or Iraq from attacking them, it also enraged important segments of GCC public opinion, convincing some people to support Al-Qaida and other organizations dedicated to using violence to overthrow Gulf regimes. Initiatives designed to reduce the dependence of Gulf economies on the proceeds from exporting oil joined with an influx of expatriate labor to reopen social divisions, since few GCC nationals were qualified to work in the positions created by the booming private sector. Moreover, the private sector's dependence on foreign direct investment has left the GCC states open to the whims of foreign investors, especially after oil prices declined rapidly and a world financial crisis erupted in 2008. Without the benefit of new oil proceeds and foreign investment, formerly booming economies in the Gulf slowed, companies collapsed, and thousands of workers lost their jobs. Even the Gulf's most dynamic and modern economy, Dubai, had to borrow billions of dollars from its neighbor, Abu Dhabi, just to pay its short-term debt payments to foreign creditors.

Perhaps the principal beneficiaries of the political and economic reforms in Gulf societies since the late 1990s have been women, the subject of Chapter 5. The chapter focuses on four key themes. First, many women in the Gulf in the past, especially before the discovery of oil, served as teachers, entrepreneurs, and political leaders. Second, issues of gender—such as the veil or gender-separated schools—are often miscast as women's issues when in reality they are part of a social system in which both women and men are expected to act modestly. The male *dishdasha* and the accompanying headgear, which are symbols of Gulf Arab identity, cover nearly as much of the body as a veil does. Third, women in Gulf societies acquired ever greater socioeconomic power in the 1990s because they were the only group beside expatriates who were able to fill the positions created by the private sector. Women benefited from the enormous investments made in education in the 1970s, especially in secondary and postsecondary schools. Since younger women on average are more literate and stay in school longer than their male counterparts, this gap will only widen in the future, especially in advanced industries, where women already dominate the workforce. Fourth, the problem of how to reconcile the desire to

utilize educated women effectively with the conservative framework of Gulf society remains an important and troubling question for GCC governments and their peoples. Extending the right to vote to women and permitting them to drive—issues that make headlines today—will look minor in comparison to those issues facing the GCC states when women emerge as the only segment of the indigenous population qualified to work in modern economies. Indigenous men show few signs of wishing to compete with them, preferring to work in family businesses, the army, or the government, occupations that do not require extensive education.

In Chapter 6 I investigate the role of non-Arabs, non-Muslims, and Shia in Arab Gulf societies along with the relationship of these groups to indigenous Sunni Arab peoples. US Protestant missionaries, Indian merchants, Jewish pearl dealers, South Asian business consultants, and Western oil executives have thrived in the Gulf and have built important institutions. Many of these people still make contributions to the region. Although Gulf peoples, and Saudis in particular, have a reputation for religious intolerance, the ruling families in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have readily integrated non-Muslims into their societies and granted them wide cultural freedoms and, over time, direct state protection and citizenship. Shia have faced official hostility, but they have also benefited from the rise of the oil industry and the opportunities it has provided them for rapid socioeconomic advancement. Just as indigenous Sunni Arabs have been affected by the technological and rapid political changes in the Middle East since 1990, non-Muslims and Shia have, too. These individuals can turn not only to international media and nongovernmental organizations to promote better labor practices in the Gulf but also to the Shia government in Iraq, to India, and to other states that send workers to the Gulf. Many expatriates also maintain extensive communal organizations in the Gulf and have representatives in their home country's parliament. The demographic presence of foreigners (as much as 70 percent of the population in some states) and their sociopolitical activities have not gone unnoticed by the indigenous Sunni Arabs. Although some fear that the expatriates will lead to the eventual extinction of indigenous Gulf society, others have sought to incorporate Indian democratic traditions into civil society and to give foreigners the opportunity to become citizens. How well indigenous Gulf Arabs (and expatriate workers) reconcile these issues will play an important role in the future of the region.

In Chapter 7 I argue that the GCC states are normal—not exotic—societies, which face many of the same challenges that other states have faced for decades. Although there is little doubt that petroleum will play a role in their economies for years to come, I show in this book that there are significant benefits to adopting an approach to the Gulf that does not effectively begin and end with oil. It is worth noting here that the demographic and socioeconomic concerns of Gulf Arabs are analogous to those of Europeans, who fear that

their nations are evolving into a giant Euro Disney that will be run by foreign hordes.<sup>13</sup> Similarly troubling is that young men in the Gulf are more interested in reckless driving, drug abuse, and other dangerous forms of behavior than in earning a college education or competing in the modern workforce—much like many of their counterparts in North America. In Georgia and other US states, men have been disproportionately affected by the recent global financial crisis and have fallen far behind their female peers in educational achievement.<sup>14</sup> Globalization has also forced Gulf Arabs, much like other peoples, to address aspects of their past that had long been ignored or hidden, aspects such as the Jews who lived in Najran and in Manama. Such problems will continue to vex scholars for years to come as the Gulf diversifies economically and becomes a region in which oil will play a significant but less vital role over time. The economic and political structures of the GCC states may eventually resemble that of contemporary Mexico, where oil revenues allow the national government to provide social services at a lower rate of taxation but do not determine the political and economic structures of the nation's society.

The present moment is an especially exciting one in Gulf history, since states that were made suddenly wealthy by the presence of petroleum must ponder the many questions that arise as their ancient traditions come into uneasy contact with both modernity and money.

## Notes

1. For more on Shaikh Nazim and his use of technology, see Sean Foley, "The Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, Islamic Sainthood, and Religion in Modern Times," *Journal of World History* 19, no. 4 (December 2008): 521–545.

2. Ibid.

3. Frank Viviano, "Kingdom on Edge: Saudi Arabia," *National Geographic* 204, no. 4 (October 2003): 3–41.

4. US Department of State, Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2005: Saudi Arabia" (available at <http://www.state.gov/>).

5. The leading proponents of the rentier model are Hazem Beblawi, Kiren Chaudhry, Jill Crystal, Gregory Gause, and Giacomo Luciani. Even the recent work of Michael Herb, which investigates the institutional development of the states' monarchies and compares Kuwait and the UAE, accepts the guiding assumptions of the rentier model as accurate. The same can be said of the Italian scholar Matteo Legrenzi, who has done the most in-depth recent work on the GCC. One scholar who has sought to move away from the rentier paradigm in regards to Saudi Arabia is Pascal Ménoret. Together, these studies have yielded important insights into the institutional constructions of GCC states, such as the political and economic dangers of state dependence on oil sales and the problems arising from weak societal institutions. For more on these works, see Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Kiren Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East*

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gregory Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994); Michal Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Matteo Legrenzi, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Diplomacy, Security and Economy in a Changing Region* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); Pascal Ménoret, *The Saudi Enigma*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Zed Books, 2005).

6. Michael Ross, "Oil, Islam, and Women," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (February 2008): 107–123.

7. This type of misperception is hardly unique to Gulf states. Imperial Russia, which is often portrayed as an autocratic police state, had significantly fewer police officers per capita in the first decades of the twentieth century than democratic states, such as Great Britain or France. For more on this paradox and the surprising weakness of Russia's police forces in relation to its civil society before World War I, see Paul du Quenoy, *Stage Fright: Politics and the Performing Arts in Late Imperial Russia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

8. All of these statistics are approximate and based on the following: Anthony Cordesman and Khalid al-Rodhan, *Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies and Praeger Security International, 2007); United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes, *Surveys of Criminal Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems* (see <http://www.unodc.org/>); the work of scholars with Vision of Humanity (see <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/>).

9. Nora Boustany, "Barrier-Breaking Bahraini Masters Diplomatic Scene: Nonoo Is First Jewish Ambassador from an Arab Nation," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2008.

10. Mackie notes in the report: "In a country where certain proclivities are tolerated one would expect to find (amongst boys and young men who are passive agents) the rectal complications peculiar to this disease, but I only once heard of stricture of the rectum in a youth but was not able to see him." F. P. Mackie, *Report to the Saudi Arabian Mining Syndicate on Saudi Arabia's Public Health*, March 7, 1940; reprinted in United States Department of State, *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Saudi Arabia, 1930–1944* (Washington, DC: National Archives, National Records and Archives Service, General Services Administration, 1974), Reel 3.

11. Victor Sanmiguel, *Christians in Kuwait* (Beirut: Beirut Press, 1970), 69–70.

12. Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Saudi Activist Blogger Freed After 4 Months in Jail Without Charge," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2008; "Internet Is New Frontline in War for Human Rights: Amnesty," Agence France-Presse—English, May 23, 2007.

13. For more on European fears of a demographic and cultural catastrophe on the continent, see Russell Shorto, "No Babies?" *New York Times*, June 29, 2008.

14. Sarah Baxter, "Women Are Victors in 'ManceSSION'; Economics and Gender Roles Are Being Rewritten in America as Men Bear the Brunt of Job Losses," *Sunday Times* (London), June 7, 2009; Janell Ross and Heidi Hall, "After Unemployment, Many Men Struggle with New Family Role," *Tennessean*, August 2, 2009 (available at <http://www.tennessean.com/>).