



The Fifth Annual Gulf Studies Forum

“Social Transformations in the Gulf Countries and the Problem of Identity and Values”

The fifth annual iteration of the Gulf Studies Forum will be devoted to studying social transformations in the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In keeping with tradition, the Gulf Studies Forum will include a second, parallel track of sessions devoted to studying the foreign relations of the Gulf States. For the 2018 session, this parallel track will concentrate on “Gulf-United States Relations”.

Identity and Social Transformations in the Arab Gulf States

During the twentieth century, recently independent states in the Arabian Peninsula were engaged in the rapid modernization of their social, political and economic structures. These processes resembled closely what took place earlier in the Arab Mashreq during the early post-colonial phase. One important caveat is that the Gulf States never fully experienced European imperialism in the way that the other Arab regions did. Although Britain did create “Protectorates” along the eastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula, it never sought to undo the traditionalist structures found there, and in particular the tribal structures. Indeed, British policy sought to bolster tribalism and ensure its continuity.

Tribalism did however experience another significant transformation with the increasing power of modern states in the 1970s. Emboldened by rapidly increasing oil revenues, the states on the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula used educational, media and economic policies to help mold “national” identities which transcended the tribes. There were deliberate attempts to fashion narratives which distinguished the citizens of one Gulf state from another, but the national identities of these Gulf States were in turn entwined with other existing, distinct realities, reflecting the complex social fabric of the wider region. Firstly, there was an over-arching Arab identity which made itself felt not only through language and culture, but also as a matter of political orientation. Another competing loyalty was that of an Islamic identity, one which clearly imprinted on all of the Gulf societies. In certain instances, the Gulf States even chose to identify with a given confessional school of thought within Islam.

Most immediately, however, was the joint “Gulf” identity shared by all of these countries, and which superseded their individual national identities. This Gulf (or *Khaleeji*) identity was reinvigorated following the integration of the member-states of what would become the Gulf Cooperation Council, and a vaunted cultural, civilizational and economic integration of these countries particularly as concerns matters relating to the management of natural resources. In practice, the over-arching *Khaleeji* identity as well as other supra-national identities impacting the citizens of the Gulf countries did not complement the national identities of the individual Gulf States, but rather were in competition with the national identities. This was exacerbated by the fact that the small size of the Gulf States has always necessitated that they subscribe to extra-national identities. Of course, this tension between the national identity of the nation-state and a broader nationalism was present in all Arab countries—but in the Gulf States, it manifests itself in a more complex, if subtle and unspoken way.

Equally, the national identities of each of the Gulf States also overlapped with and informed the “primordial” social bonds extant prior to the rise of nation-states in the Gulf, including particularly networks of kinship and

tribalism. This meant that the national identity of the newly formed Gulf states were challenged by pre-existing social structures that existed prior to the discovery of oil, even as these structures were transformed by the process of economic development which went along with the discovery of oil and the growth of oil revenues.

The governing regimes of the Gulf States in fact entrenched, bolstered and institutionalized these pre-existing "primordial" social structures even as they went along promoting an idea of citizenship and a common national identity. This, arguably, led to the persistence of traditional social structures in the Gulf States, making them unique in blending modernist and pre-modern elements of identity in their national culture.

A reimagining of these identities and the interplay between them usually accompanied every crisis to afflict the Gulf States. One clear example of this is how the most recent (beginning in mid-2017) in intra-Gulf relations has led to an exploration of the relationship between Qatari national identity and tribal loyalties and identities. In Qatar, there is a growing sense that national identity must supersede other loyalties, particularly those which cut across borders. This emphasis increases in direct proportion to the tensions which afflict the Saudi-Qatari relationship.

The *Khaleeji* identity poses a theoretical problem regarding its nature. Is it a cultural identity (based on shared historical, moral and social values)? Or is it a political identity, whether in terms of political considerations and similarities, or in terms of necessity and usage? Regardless of whether identity is a cultural or a political issue, identity, choices and determinants of identity have cultural expressions (in the anthropological sense) concerning lifestyle (customs, traditions, clothing, food, etc.) and symbolic expression- in terms of the assertion of national identity, or of *Khaleeji* identity, or the inclusion of Arab or Islamic identity. Thus, an essential part of societal transformations and societal values becomes fundamental to identity.

The national identity, which the Gulf State made efforts to build, as an element of sovereignty and independence, faced challenges with organic origins such as "family", "clan" and "tribe", as well as foreign challenges related to the rentier structure of the Gulf States and their political economies. The emergence of the oil industry, and the state's control of it within the framework of the so-called rentier state, have led to the concentration of vast wealth in the Gulf States. With their low demographics, the number of foreign workers and other consequences of this gap have had a significant impact on the social structure.

Citizens of the Gulf countries become a minority, vastly dwarfed in number by foreign workers who make up 88-90% of the population in the UAE and Qatar and 70% in Kuwait. Important interactions have resulted with significant impact on the national identity of these countries and societies. The national identity has come to mean, among other things, distinguishing citizens from expatriates, and emphasizing the privileges of citizens. Consumer lifestyles have emerged at the expense of a previous standard of living, and there are constant attempts to reconcile this lifestyle with traditions and customs.

Other elements, such as the spread of international schools and universities represented another challenge for the national identity that the Gulf States were trying to nurture. The Arabic language, a vital cornerstone of this identity-building project, struggled against the foreign education systems that assigned little importance to teaching it.

Consequently, Gulf and Arabian Peninsula studies focused on identity problems in Gulf societies, their cultural and political dimensions, and their relationship with the dynamics and development of Gulf societies. It is a subject that suffers from both complexity and a scarcity of literature, providing new insights into the Gulf societies and the extent to which Gulf Societies commit to the national identity project. This topic is addressed through several themes:

- Overlap/distinction between building a national identity and building a Gulf identity;
- Cultural, intellectual and symbolic expressions of identity in the Gulf countries;
- Mechanisms for building national identity in the Gulf countries.
- State/people/tribe, and traditional primordial structures.
- The characteristics of modernization in the Gulf countries and their impact on values and identity.
- Tradition and modernity in the Gulf societies: continuity and disconnection.
- Multiple identities in Gulf societies: cultural and political.

Gulf Relations with the United States

The discovery of oil in the Gulf region at the beginning of the 20th century drew special attention from the US. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the importance of oil climbed and in February 1945, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the President of the United States invited Saudi King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, aboard the US Quincy cruiser, representing the first station in Gulf-US relations. The meeting established the formula of the oil-for-protection relationship between the parties. US policy in the Gulf, since the mid-20th century, was linked to the rest of the Middle East. Throughout the Cold War, the US sought to assert its interests by enabling the countries of the region to resist Soviet penetration in the Gulf and the Middle East. For more than three decades, the United States continued to obtain Arab oil despite supporting Israel, until October 1973, when the Arab oil exporting states took the decision to impose an oil embargo on the United States and the West to force Israel to withdraw from the Arab territories occupied in 1967.

However, the tension between the Gulf States and the United States, as a result of the 1973 oil shock, did not last long. These relations were soon restored. Indeed, US-Gulf relations grew closer after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Washington continued to ensure the security of the Gulf Arab states, which in turn played the role of guarantor for energy supplies to the United States. The two parties overcame the most serious challenges faced after the end of the cold war.

The events of 9/11, and increased Western hostility towards Islam and the Middle East posed a fresh challenge to US-Gulf relations, especially as some American currents lay the responsibility for those events on the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia. The idea of a clash of civilizations and Islam as a source of terrorism spread. Meanwhile, there the US supported regime-change in the Middle East, while some voices called for the traditional approach to the US-Gulf relationship to be abandoned in favour of relying on Russian and Caspian oil instead.¹ The invasion of Iraq and the US regional policies posed major challenges to regional security and stability for the Gulf States. Iran sought to benefit from the dismantled Iraqi state and to fill the void created by the Iraqi regime's overthrow and grab the reins of power in Iraq through its allied Iraqi political forces.

On the ground, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave Iran a unique opportunity to reshape the regional landscape. In contrast, the GCC countries had to look for an unconventional approach to their relationship with Washington, based on military cooperation, collective security and regional defense. But these countries, which have relied on the United States militarily, did not succeed in developing a unified policy or joint plans

¹ Fiona Hill, "Russia: The 21st Century's Energy Superpower?" Brookings, March 1, 2002 accessed on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/YptYhC>; Fiona Hill, *Energy Empire: Oil, Gas and Russia's Revival* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), Brookings, Accessed on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/AWSE4f>, p. 9.

to integrate defense systems to address their security dilemma, despite the consensus reached between the two parties on issues of collective security.²

The collective security issues of the GCC countries cannot be understood in terms of their establishment of a joint military defense force³. The differences between the Gulf States were reinforced by the increasing rate of arms deals that these countries receive from the United States and given the absence of a clear strategic position on the future of this force. Statistically, Saudi Arabia ranked 22nd among the top global arms importers between 2006 and 2010,⁴ rather than putting in the effort to formulate a framework for a unified force. Thus, the GCC countries continued their policy of relying militarily on the United States as a major supplier of weapons in return for oil that began in the 1980s, despite the changing priorities of the United States in the Gulf.

With the outbreak of the Arab revolutions at the end of 2010, nearly two years after the Barack Obama administration moved into the White House, differences appeared. The Gulf Arab States reacted with varying stances towards the changes demanded by the Arab street in the quest for freedom and dignity. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states stood against change in Egypt. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia intervened in early 2011 to suppress the popular uprising in the country. Riyadh accused Washington of abandoning its traditional allies in the region, such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.⁵ On the other hand, Qatar dealt with the Arab revolutions through the diplomacy of settling sensitive disputes. Qatar emerged as the biggest natural gas exporter in the region and hosted the US military base in its territory.⁶ At the same time Qatar, since 2011, played its most pivotal role in the region by supporting revolutionary forces, and Washington accepted these "non-traditional" forces seeking to forge relations with them. While the Arab revolutions generally amplified US-Gulf differences, the Syrian revolution, in particular, became a source of tension given US hesitation towards the Assad regime.

Although the United States continues to sell arms to the Gulf States worth tens of billions of dollars and retains about 35,000 US troops in the region, to strengthen its position towards Iran, Gulf-US relations were strained with the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal in July 2015.⁷

But the tide changed with the election of Donald Trump as president of the US. An alliance between Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and the new US president emerged. Trump's arrival at the Riyadh Summit in May 2017 was a precursor to the Gulf crisis, which began with a hack on Qatari media only two days after the summit. This was followed by the declaration of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on the morning of 5 June 2017, that they would sever diplomatic and consular relations in Qatar and impose sanctions.⁸ It seemed clear that

² Charles Tripp, "Regional Organizations in the Arab Middle East" in: *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order*, L. Fawcett & A. Hurrell (eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 293.

³ At its third session, in 1982, the Supreme Council of the GCC decided to establish the "Peninsula Shield Force" force, and the name was amended in 2005 to become the "Peninsula Shield Forces".

⁴ Paul Holtom et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfer 2010," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (March: 2011), p.7. accessed on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/pJwna5>

⁵ John R. Bradley, "Saudi Arabia's Invisible Hand in the Arab Spring: How the Kingdom is Wielding Influence Across the Middle East?" *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2011, accessed on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/W8j4ry>

⁶ Simon Henderson, "Uneven Diplomacy: The U.S.-Qatar Relationship," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23/2/2015, retrieved on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/2t9Fuq>

⁷ Michael Eisenstadt, "U.S.-GCC Relations: Closing the Credibility Gap", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 9/7/2015, retrieved on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/vPRVzn>

⁸ The closure of land, sea and air ports to Qatar, the prohibition of transit on its territory, airspace and territorial waters, the prohibition of its citizens from traveling to Qatar, the prohibition of Qatari nationals from entering its territory and giving Qatari residents and visitors of their citizens a specified period of departure.

Trump's arrival at the White House encouraged both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to reignite a stalemated dispute with Qatar and settle old accounts. The conflicting US position on the Gulf crisis only served to escalate the situation.⁹

Commercially, Gulf Arab countries vary in their level of investment in Washington. According to data from the US Treasury Department, Gulf bonds in the United States reached \$ 263.6 billion by December 2017. Saudi Arabia topped the Gulf States as the largest Investor with \$ 147.4 billion in US bonds at the end of 2017. The United Arab Emirates came second with \$ 57.7 billion in the same period, Kuwait with \$36.8 billion, Oman with \$20 billion¹⁰ and Qatar with \$ 1.19 billion, while Bahrain ranked only \$662 million.

Low oil prices and the shale oil revolution that challenged the position of the Gulf states in their relationship with Washington (by turning the United States into the world's largest fossil energy producer in the coming years and the diminishing importance of the Gulf in Washington) has not had a significant impact on trade and economic relations between the Gulf States and the United States. The Gulf States have remained the main guarantor of energy supplies to the United States. In other words, the constant divergence in relations between the United States and the United States over the past decades, the declining importance of the Gulf, and the growing inter-Gulf problems have not forced the parties to form a new kind of relationship. Rather, they have maintained the traditional approach, which is based on securing energy sources for Washington and Gulf countries' access to security.

Themes to be covered:

- Historical relations between the Gulf States and the United States.
- Military relations between the Gulf States and the United States.
- Economic relations between the Gulf States and the United States.
- The impact of the end of the Cold War on relations between the Gulf States and the United States.
- Transformations in the relationship between the Gulf States and the United States after the events of 11 September 2001.
- The Arab revolutions and the relations between the Gulf States and the United States.
- Alternative energy and future relations between the Gulf States and the United States.
- Changes in the global system and its impact on the US role and influence in the Gulf.

Given the importance of the two topics, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRC) will hold an academic conference on Identity and Social Transformations in the Arab Gulf States as a main topic, and the topic of US-Gulf Relations as a secondary topic at the 5th annual Gulf Studies Forum. Based on the above, the Forum invites interested researchers to participate in the conference by presenting a research paper, with a focus on the above mentioned topics.

⁹“ The Inconsistency in the US Position and its Potential Repercussions for the Gulf Crisis”, Policy Analysis Unit, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 20/7/2017, retrieved on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/mRFZCq>

¹⁰ Major Foreign Holders Of Treasury Securities, Treasury Department, March 15, 2018, accessed on 15/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/JToJfm>



Procedures:

The Forum invites university professors and researchers to present their research in one of the two research topics related to the issues mentioned above. Abstracts (400 words) must be received by the end of May 2018. The abstract should clarify the research question, its importance, its contribution to the topic, and the methodology and sources.

Research approved by the Forum's academic committee should be submitted as a full paper (5000-6000 words) should be received by 15 September 2018 in order to satisfy the Center's peer-review and editing procedures. The academic committee shall inform the researcher of its decision and may request adjustments to its proposals in order to meet research quality standards.

All correspondence should be made through gulf.forum@dohainstitute.org

