

Gulf Studies Forum

Background Paper

Following on from the success of the Third Annual Conference of Arab Research Centers held in December 2014, “The GCC Countries: Politics and Economics in Light of Regional and International Shifts and Changes”, the ACRPS is now launching the Gulf Studies Forum. This annual Forum will be organized in two tracks. The first will address a chosen topic of significance to the GCC states and will change each year while the second will discuss the broader challenges posed to GCC states by the regional and international environment and will feature as a permanent item on the Forum’s agenda. This year, Education in the Gulf has been selected as the discussion topic for the first annual meeting of the Forum, to be held in late 2015.

Track 1 – Education and its Challenges in the GCC States

Education is one of the most pressing challenges facing the GCC states, one which has received much attention in the Gulf countries’ development plans. Ever since independence, the GCC states have made a concerted effort to prioritize investment in the education sector, in recognition of the fact that education holds the key to the expansion of the development process, the development of the labor market, and the nationalization of qualified and trained labor. Traditionally, the Gulf states, renowned for high levels of public expenditures, have dedicated large parts of their budgets to the education sector – both in terms of infrastructure and human resources.

In the early years after independence, the Gulf’s education policy was primarily based on state initiatives. State universities and schools were established and expanded with the view that they acted as centers for the production of a qualified national workforce. With the increase in the price and output of oil, and the accompanying construction boom, the Gulf witnessed a shift characterized by a rise in incomes, living standards, and population growth. Plans were made to develop an education system that was able to cater for the ambitious national development visions laid down by the Gulf states (i.e. Qatar 2030, UAE 2021, Bahrain 2030 and so forth). Accordingly, education policy was shaped around these national development plans, while legislation took into account the changing environment and the growing goals and aspirations of the Gulf. Education cities and free zones thus appeared alongside private schools and universities. Branches of foreign schools and

universities were established in the context of the globalization of higher education, as part of the diversification strategies within the education sector that aspired to raise standards, help shift the burden from the state alone, meet the needs of a very diverse population in the Gulf region, and attract foreign students.

The establishment of various branches of foreign schools and universities, despite their many achievements, has also posed serious challenges to the education systems of the Gulf. These are manifest in the absence of a state role, a proliferation of curricula, differences in teaching methods, variation in the level and quality of teaching staff, an impact on the use of Arabic language and its effect on the local culture, as well as the divergence in programs and goals between the various categories of education – state and private, national and foreign. The above discrepancies raise questions about the possibility of creating a Gulf-wide arena for higher education similar to that set up by Europeans, allowing for the mobility of students and researchers but under a unified framework of programs and subjects.

Notably, even with the proliferation of branches of foreign universities in the Gulf, GCC governments have continued to expand policies for sending students abroad. The criteria for selection, the programs chosen, their goals and degree of compliance with the needs of the local labor market, as well as the cost-benefit balance are to date unclear and not subject to investigation and study. This necessitates an investigation into the benefits and drawbacks of sending Gulf nationals to universities abroad versus offering higher education to students in their home countries.

The narrow margin for academic freedom and existent measures of censorship of curricula, especially in the social sciences and humanities, have an undeniable negative effect on the level of education, and inevitably on the quality of graduates entering highly competitive job markets. Hence, there is a pressing need for education and research programs, especially in the social sciences, humanities, and economics, to fulfil their central role in creating the academic and intellectual groundings for Gulf citizens to participate in the creation of civil society institutions and the building, strengthening, and oversight of government bodies, in order to achieve minimal levels of good governance.

The above is critical in seeking to develop quality education, enhance the capacity of graduates, and promote academic research, both theoretical and applied. Furthermore, the role of social, cultural, economic, and political circles in the Gulf remains equally important in influencing the course of the educational process, given that educational bodies – schools, universities, the ministries of education, boards of education, and teacher training

colleges – do not operate in isolation from the policies and general socio-economic conditions of the state.

Consistent with the ACRPS's belief in the importance of education for Arab revival and for building the Arab nation-state, the ACRPS has earmarked the subject of Education in the Gulf as the research topic for Track One. The Forum invites Gulf, Arab, and foreign researchers to submit papers addressing the aforementioned ideas or others related to the topic of education within the following themes:

Theme 1: Education Policy and Strategy in the GCC states

- Public policy in the Gulf states and its relation to education policy
- Education policy and planning: visions, aims, and laws
- Public spending on education: trends, programs, and measuring results
- Educational free zones and cities
- National universities: current state and future prospects
- Policy on sending students abroad: current state, results, and outputs
- Foreign universities: their role, benefits, and challenges
- Pre-university education: state and private schools and the challenges they face

Theme 2: The Education Process, Reality and Challenges

- Curricula and teaching methods and their influence on academic and educational structures
- Teaching staff: their contribution to building a national education system in the Gulf
- How to guarantee quality of education and to what end?
- The state of the Arabic language in educational institutions
- Academic freedoms, the education community and interaction within educational bodies
- Social bonds and cultural factors and their effect on education in the Gulf states
- Towards a unified Gulf space for education

Theme 3: The Implications of Education Policy and its Outputs for Development and Society in the Gulf States

- Outputs of education and the requirements of the labor market in the Gulf states
- Education and training for the citizens of the Gulf
- Education and empowerment of women in the Gulf

- Education and Gulf culture
- Education and national identity
- Education and development in the Gulf states
- Education and globalization

Track 2 – Regional and International Challenges for the Gulf States

The GCC states continue to garner considerable global attention given their political and economic weight in the Arab region, and in the world. Today, however, they are facing unprecedented challenges on a multitude of levels. The GCC was originally established in response to threats that confronted the region at the time, most prominently the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. It also displayed great cohesion in dealing with subsequent challenges such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the US invasion of Iraq. This is the first time, however, that the GCC appears entirely exposed to external threats and surrounded by them on all four sides, whether in the form of the unrest and chaos in neighboring Arab states, or as a result of the changes to the regional balance of power over the last two decades that have led to the infiltration of Iranian influence in the north of the Arabian Peninsula (the Fertile Crescent), and in the south (Yemen).

In the absence of an Arab regional security system, or even an influential Arab power able to restore the balance of power or act as a regional security safety-valve in the confrontation with Iranian regional ambitions, the region stands in turmoil. Iraq, which long formed the defensive wall against Iranian influence, witnessed the destruction of the foundations of its power following the US invasion, and as a result has transformed into a failed state governed by the logic of the majority and sectarian quotas. Its tragedy has only been compounded by the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its taking control of approximately one-third of the country. Syria has been transformed from an important regional player into a battleground for regional and international conflicts following the ruling regime's decision to crush peaceful popular protests by force. Meanwhile, Egypt is occupied with its own internal problems which were exacerbated after the military coup that derailed the chances of a democratic transition.

While the Arabs are occupied with their internal problems, and as their regional weight is rapidly fading, Iranian-American rapprochement is stoking the fears of the GCC states and undermining confidence in the security arrangements in place in the region since World War II. As Washington appears engrossed in these efforts to reach an agreement with Iran over its nuclear program, in preparation for the widening of bilateral relations, the Gulf states have also encountered a return of Russia to the Arab East. Russia's coordination with

Iran has supported local players whose actions, for the most part, have led to the collapse of the Arab state and militia control over its institutions, agencies, and levers.

If Iran represents the main state challenge to the GCC states, another non-state challenge has come to the fore with the rise of ISIL and its control over wide swaths of Iraq and Syria. This unforeseen development has led to a rearrangement of priorities for both regional and global actors. Concern has shifted, if only partially, from the attempt to contain growing Iranian influence to the attempt to contain the influence of ISIL and its threat to the post-World War I arrangements and geographical divisions. In response, the United States hastened to form a coalition bringing together the GCC states and others to contain and crush ISIL.

In the meantime, the US desire to rebuild the regional order has become clear. The new order will be based on balances that do not require direct US military intervention, while preventing any regional power gaining hegemony over the region and possibly threatening US interests. This trend underscores the inherent need for the Gulf states to work together to guarantee their interests by defining this regional order, rather than leaving the United States and non-Arab regional states to unilaterally formulate it to further their own interests, goals, and conceptions.

Economically, the shale oil and gas revolution represents a major challenge to the position of the GCC as the world's largest grouping of oil and gas producers. This has pushed it into a price war, not against traditional producers but against shale oil and gas companies, particularly in the United States. Despite the fact that the US is set to become the world's number one producer of fossil fuels within the next two years, and become a net exporter rather than importer in some sectors, Arab oil remains the essential factor in setting the world oil price. The low cost of Gulf oil will always make it more attractive, more economically viable, and less environmentally damaging than other forms of production such as shale oil and gas. With the growing tensions between Russia and the West over various regional and international crises, most recently in Ukraine, the West will increase its reliance on Gulf oil and gas as it tries to find alternatives to Russia's energy dominance on the European continent.

At the same time, the states of East Asia—today driving the world economy forward with a share of world GDP approaching 50%—are becoming more dependent on Arab oil and gas. This makes it incumbent on the GCC states to give more attention to the diversification of their economic and political relations, and to move on from the stage of exclusive concern for relations with the West and towards developing relations with Asia and other states

whereby the need for cheap and secure energy is not subservient to political considerations.

In light of the above, and given the growing threats facing the GCC states resulting from the regional and international developments taking shape in the current environment, the following themes have been chosen for the track on regional and international challenges.

Theme 1: Gulf Security

- Ramifications of the rise of Iran for the security of the GCC states
- Issues of Gulf regional security post Arab Spring
- Issues of security and nuclear energy and the effect of the Iranian nuclear agreement on the GCC states
- Security agreements with international powers
- Energy security and its provision

Theme 2: Relations with the Major Powers

- The United States
- Europe
- Russia

Theme 3: Relations with Asia

- The rising Asian states: China, India, Japan, and South Korea
- Pakistan and Afghanistan
- The states of Central Asia and the Caucasuses

Theme 4: The GCC States and the Regional Order

- The Syrian crisis
- The Iraqi crisis
- The Palestinian issue and the peace process
- Political and security challenges in Egypt and Yemen
- Relations with Turkey and Iran



Theme 5: Gulf Policy towards Non-State Actors

- Lebanese Hezbollah
- The Muslim Brotherhood
- ISIL
- The Houthis
- Shiite militias in Iraq