



Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman chairs the meeting of defense ministers of the GCC states in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on 15 November 2016.

Khaleeji Identity in Contemporary Gulf Politics ***by Gaith Abdulla***

K*haleeji* identity has great potential to explain the contemporary politics and international relations of the Gulf. However, it is by no means a widely recognized concept; you'd be hard pressed to find even passing reference to the term in the literature on Gulf politics.¹ *Khaleeji* (meaning 'of the Gulf' in Arabic) denotes a socio-political regional identity that is shared by citizens of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. *Khaleeji* identity is the next step in the evolution of political identity in the Gulf, which began with tribal identities and developed to include national identities with the advent of nation-states in the region in the mid-20th Century.

Khaleeji identity builds on strong cultural homogeneity within the Gulf states, the result of a long history of sustained social engagement and intermarriage. It also features prominently in popular culture, music, television, sports, civil society, and reaches all the way to the top decision-making levels of government. In the regional milieu, *khaleeji* identity has had a defining role in the creation and durability of the GCC, what is today the most stable and highly functional regional institution in the Middle East.² Although fear of an expansionist post-revolution Iran was one of the primary motivations behind the establishment of this regional architecture,³ the underlying *khaleeji* identity common to the Gulf states was the social glue that allowed such regionalization to take place. What's interesting about the GCC is that since its creation

in 1981 it has become a key driver of *khaleeji* identity. The GCC is the most tangible manifestation of the regional identity and this international institution has “contributed decisively to the creation of a *khaleeji* persona in international relations.”⁴

***Khaleeji* – in theory**

Despite its significance and potential, *khaleeji* identity has remained an under-theorized term. This is primarily the result of the overriding influence of oil on the conceptualization of the politics of the Gulf. Many of the existing theories of the socio-political structures of the Gulf have developed with oil as a central unit of analysis. As these conceptions reflect the strategic, political, and economic security concerns of great powers (namely the US) in the region, it is only natural that oil has had such a defining role in shaping the theories and perceptions of Gulf politics.⁵

Because elite and ruling social classes in the Gulf are the most relevant to oil production and policy, they are the most notable classes to account for in the oil-centric theories. And these theories, which are mostly concerned with security and oil output from a great power perspective, content themselves by discussing the internal dynamics of Gulf states as a relationship of the elite/ruling classes with the rest of ‘society’ measured in terms of material resources.⁶ The inflated influence of oil, great power strategic interests, and the elite/ruling classes on existing theories points to the importance of developing concepts such as *khaleeji* identity that open avenues to constructivist approaches to the politics of the Gulf as opposed to the hawk-eyed realist conceptualizations.

Identity and the interests of the state

Realism plays a big role in the behavior of *khaleeji* states given the region’s strategic significance. But among other nebulous state-society relationships, institutional policy production is often mired in self-interests. Hence taking a step back and re-theorizing could possibly yield a better understanding of policy production and state behavior in the Gulf. On the other hand, with a sight set beyond material interests and security concerns, constructivism recognizes that states are social actors, seeing identity and other “ideational forces” as important motivators “on political interests and thus on national security policies.”⁷

From a constructivist perspective, *khaleeji* identity forms a vital component of Gulf politics and would be a cornerstone in any project of regional integration in the Gulf. Constructivism defines regionalism as a product of “*regional awareness*, a shared sense of belonging to a particular regional community. . . . Therefore, sub-regional integration is dependent on the compatibility of major values relevant to political decision-making.”⁸

The potential of a shared regional identity, like *khaleeji* identity, for policy production and grass-roots regionalization is evident. However, bygone failed integration projects based on the perception of a shared identity (e.g. Arabism) call for caution. The issues that plague Arabism are for the most part the same problems faced in the Gulf, that the project of integration exists at the level of states, is informed by the ruling/elite classes, and lacks functioning democratic avenues. These factors hinder the effective representation of the social dimension.⁹

However, the homogeneity of the socio-political climate in the Gulf states is something that did not feature in the Arab integration project. This is where *khaleeji* identity comes to play: it represents not only common popular culture, history, traditions and heritage, but also complements the existent prevailing

II. Analysis

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socio-political identities, namely Arab, Islamic, tribal and national identities. This regional identity represents a shared political culture amongst citizens and not only common ideals limited to the ruling/

elite classes.

The Middle East today is probably in the worst shape in its modern history. Amidst this, the Gulf states contrast starkly with their surroundings. Although by no means unscathed by the turmoil, the six members of the GCC find themselves as the most stable and coherently functional states in the region. As the rest of the Arab world has ground to a halt, Gulf cities are argued to be the new centers of the region. They are now the “nerve center of the contemporary Arab world’s culture, commerce, design, architecture, art and academia.”¹⁰ The Gulf states need to reflect on their particularities, strengths, and weaknesses as they find themselves occupying positions of power and influence in the Middle East that they are unaccustomed to. *Khaleeji* identity is an invaluable particularity to the Gulf states, both shaping and being shaped by actions and policies. It acts as a dynamic force strengthening intra-GCC relations at the elite and grass roots levels and informs more coherent and consistent regional interaction.

The relationship between identity, the state, and society has become more complex and pronounced than ever in the history of the Gulf. The roles, actions, and attitudes of the Gulf states are changing, and with that the role of identity becomes ever more salient. It is necessary to appreciate the role that *khaleeji* identity plays in the social milieu as a fundamental driver of domestic attitudes and regional and international policy positions, as doing so will create more strategic, sustainable, and perhaps democratic policies. Indeed, *khaleeji* identity will remain highly dynamic as it defines the societies and states of the Arab Gulf in the 21st Century.

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¹ A notable exception is Adam Hanieh’s conceptualization of *khaleeji* capital in his book *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2011). In defining *khaleeji* capital he explains “The Arabic word *khaleej* is literally translated as “Gulf” but goes beyond a geographic meaning to convey a common pan-Gulf Arab identity that sets the people of the region apart from the rest of the Middle East.” (p.2).

² Abdullah Al Shayji, “Salman doctrine is the best option,” *Gulf News*, April 3, 2016.

³ Kristian Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (London: Hurst, 2011).

⁴ Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p.153. In his book, Legrenzi argues that the GCC has been responsible for a Gulf popular identity becoming a substantive reality and “working its way into the political and economic landscape of the six Gulf monarchies.” (p.2)

⁵ Current Gulf politics are clearly shaped by U.S. policy and oil security. For example, the U.S. ‘pivot to Asia’ is seen as one of the main driving forces behind Saudi Arabia’s newfound assertiveness and hard power projection in the region, the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen being the prime example of this. And the perception is that current record low oil prices have motivated the governments of the Gulf states to seek to expedite processes of economic diversification and escape the dependency on oil. See Roberts, David, “Shake up for the sheikhs as the oil slump hits home,” *Chatham House*, June/July 2016.

- ⁶ Commonly referred to as the 'ruling bargain', in which the elite/ruling classes use their oil money to subsidize their societies in return for political acquiescence. See Davidson, Christopher, "Diversification in Abu Dhabi and Dubai: The Impact on National Identity and the Ruling Bargain," in *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States*, Alsharekh, A.&R (Springborg London: Saqi Books, 2008), 143-153.
- ⁷ Legrenzi, 46.
- ⁸ Ibid, 46-47.
- ⁹ Although Arabism and Arab integration was a populist ideal and had huge popular support in its heyday, the lack of functioning democratic apparatus meant this popular dimension was never able to manifest itself in policy production. The contagion effect of the Arab Spring is a great example of these deeply ingrained shared attitudes amongst Arabs. See Lynch, Marc. "The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring." *Foreign Policy*. November 28, 2011.
- ¹⁰ Sultan Al-Qassemi, "Thriving Gulf Cities Emerge as New Centers of Arab World," *Al-Monitor*, October 8, 2013.