



Singapore Middle East Papers

The Gulf: Reshaping Regional & International Norms without “Political Dynamism” *

By Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed

Can the GCC (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf) states play a leadership role across the Middle East without major political change? Can Saudi Arabia and a selected number of GCC states become regional arbiters of Arab affairs without serious political transformations of their own? This Singapore Middle East Paper engages with debates about the recent rise of GCC countries as seemingly secure cultural and political islands of tranquillity in the middle of a turbulent Arab sea. I highlight the controversy surrounding the gradual but assertive Gulf interventions in the Middle East in the context of both historical and contemporary transnational connections that tied the region to the Arab world and beyond. I also map Gulf responses to this two-way transnationalism that has always penetrated local societies but remains deliberately excluded from the national narratives. Finally, the paper points to contradictory trajectories that have resulted from Gulf interventions in the wider region.

In general, it is possible that Gulf interventions in the Arab world have contributed to momentarily reversing the genuine trend towards democracy that started with the 2011 Arab uprisings. The Gulf itself is challenging the notion of universal human rights and propagating instead norms based on state sovereignty and security. Recently, their interventions at home and abroad aim at challenging civilizational diversity, and defend traditional values against liberal democracy.¹ In addition to heavy investment in military

This paper is based on the keynote speech that I delivered at “The Gulf and the Wider Middle East” conference in Exeter, 22 August 2016.

capabilities and the projection of those abroad, Gulf states are now major actors using cheap soft power (sponsoring think tanks and universities, in addition to influencing world public opinion through public relations companies) and economic coercion to normalise authoritarian rule. State sponsored writers and journalists in several GCC countries occasionally wrote articles in favour of the now defunct Turkish model, the Chinese model, or the Singapore model, and many other models that combine economic growth with authoritarian rule.² Recently Gulf countries have tried to enthusiastically normalise a model of economic growth without political change. Some success has been achieved, for example the removal of the Saudi led coalition responsible for bombing Yemen since March 2015 from a UN list of armies that kill and maim children.³ Saudi Arabia had threatened to break its relations with the United Nations and suspend its contribution to UN humanitarian relief in Sudan, Syria and Yemen.⁴

But economic prosperity, the enabling back bone of Gulf political ambitions, is now stumbling under the pressure of drastic decline in oil prices. In anticipation of the damage, many GCC states already adopted economic and social visions for reform; Saudi Arabia was the last country to join the visionary trail of economic transformation in April 2016 when it announced the implementation of Vision 2030. If thoroughly implemented, the visions are bound to impact traditional domestic Gulf politics and the ability of governments to continue to convince domestic and global audiences of the merits of stability and security at the expense of political dynamism. The visions are confined to moving state centred oil-based capitalist economies into open neo-liberal finance, privatisation, knowledge, diversification and greater consumption, without any visible political transformations. The silence with regard to political transformations has not gone without notice and dissent. Even the most loyal of Gulf nationals lament the absence of dynamic political culture across the six GCC states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). This alone may hinder the incessant quest among some main regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Qatar and the UAE, to achieve some kind of hegemony across the Arab world.

Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms", *Journal of Democracy*, Number 3, July 2015, pp. 49-63 and Christopher Walker, "The Hijacking of "Soft Power"", *Journal of Democracy*, volume 27, number 1, 2016, pp. 49-63.

²In a recent article Saudi journalist Jamal al-Khashogji praised the Chinese model for generating economic growth without democracy, thus challenging Western claims that a liberal democracy is the most suited political structure within which economic prosperity can be attained. He also praised Confucian capitalism and drew parallels with the Wahhabi movement of the eighteenth century, arguing that Wahhabism can be an inspiration as much as Confucianism inspired the growth miracle in China. See Jamal Khashogji "*al-wahabiyya wa al-namouthaj al-sini wa rouyat 2030*" *al-Hayat*, 18 June 2016.

³Somini Sungupta, 'United Nations Chief Exposes Limits to His Authority by Citing Saudi Threat', at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/10/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-yemen-children-ban-ki-moon.html?_r=0 accessed 17 June 2016. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon cited Saudi coercion and threat to suspend Saudi contribution to UN funds that affect relief efforts in Gaza, Sudan and Syria.

⁴Colum Lynch, 'Saudi Arabia Threatened to Break Relations with the UN', *Foreign Policy*, 7 June 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/07/saudi-arabia-threatened-to-break-relations-with-un-over-human-rights-criticism-in-yemen/> accessed 24 June 2016

In October 2013, Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, a prominent Emirati from one of the ruling families of the UAE, blogger and commentator, celebrated a new era in which, in his opinion, four Gulf cities (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and Doha) have already replaced the most prominent and famous old cities of the Arab world such as Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad.⁵ Before al-Qassemi, another Emirati political scientist, Abdulkhalik Abdulla, declared that 'this is the Arab Gulf moment in contemporary Arab history. The pillars of the new Gulf moment are political stability, incredible engine of prosperity, consistent moderate ideology, and determination to achieve incrementally full economic and monetary integration and create their internationally recognised regional organisations'.⁶ In Al-Qassemi's assessment of the new shift, dubbed as *al-haqaba al-khalijiyya* (the Gulf moment), a number of Gulf cities have overtaken other old Arab capitals in economic, social, educational, artistic, and cultural productions with the exception of what he calls 'political dynamism'. Needless to say that celebration of the rise of the Gulf cities was a symbolic projection of political, economic and cultural Gulf hegemony. In addition to the soft power of *al-haqaba al-khalijiyya*, the recent greater bold military foreign interventions of several Gulf states, for example Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE in Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen point to another controversial aspect of the rise of the Gulf. Al-Qassemi writes:

*"Over the past few years, as these traditional Arab capitals [Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, and Damascus] became more embroiled in civil strife, a new set of cities started to emerge in the Gulf, establishing themselves as the new centers of the Arab world. Abu Dhabi, its sister emirates of Dubai and Sharjah and the Qatari capital, Doha, have developed as the nerve center of the contemporary Arab world's culture, commerce, design, architecture, art and academia, attracting hundreds of thousands of Arab immigrants, including academics, businessmen, journalists, athletes, artists, entrepreneurs and medical professionals. While these Gulf cities may be unable to compete with their Arab peers in terms of political dynamism, in almost every other sense they have far outstripped their sister cities in North Africa and the Levant."*⁷

Al-Qassimi's celebration of the shift to the new Gulf centres excluded Kuwait city, Manama, and Muscat. It is also worth noting that none of the Saudi cities made it to the list of the four new Gulf cities, believed to have eclipsed the old urban centres of the Arab world.

It seems that *al-haqaba al-khalijiyya* has a pivotal additional sub-centre not necessarily associated with new cultural production but with political and religious expansion that has become the focus of serious debate and controversy around the globe. This relates mainly to Saudi Arabia but also other GCC states' religious transnational connections that allowed the globalisation of the Wahhabi-Salafi tradition. The promotion of the UAE as the new art centre of the Arab world fits in with the neo-liberal economy that has become entrenched in the Gulf, but the projection of radical religious traditions beyond

⁵ Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Thriving Gulf Cities Emerge as New Centers of Arab World", <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/abu-dhabi-dubai-doha-arab-centers.html> accessed 8 October 2013.

⁶ Abdulkhalik Abdulla 'Contemporary socio-political issues of the Arab Gulf moment', London: the Centre for the Study of Global Governance, LSE, number 11, September 2010.

⁷Ibid.

borders is an embarrassment and seems to undermine the recent cosmopolitan image celebrated in the neighbouring Gulf states. The exclusion of Saudi cities from the celebrated urban shifts does not, however, indicate that there is no serious effort in the country to present itself as the political rather than the cultural centre of the Arab world, the defender of the region against the new Iranian challenges, and the protector of all Sunnis worldwide against Shia-Iranian expansion. Riyadh has advertised itself as *asimat al-qarar al-arabi* (the capital of Arab decisions). This echoes in other Gulf capitals after the recent reconciliation with Qatar.⁸

If the new Gulf centres can boast a strong urban cultural influence, then Saudi Arabia does want to be seen as the religious and political centre not only of the Arab world but also the world of Islam. However, Riyadh as *asimat al-qarar al-arabi* (the political capital of Arab decisions) is not only contested in the Arab region but also in the Gulf itself. Al-Qassemi was clearly more enchanted by the new artistic culture of the 'cool' and trendy Gulf cities where not only many young Arabs but also a global cosmopolitan elite and labourers aspire to work and live.

More than any other short op-ed piece I have come across in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Al-Qassemi's article went viral on social media, generating heated debates between those who celebrated the new shift and those who mocked and condemned it. The controversial piece generated exchanges among diverse audiences that included academics, young netizens, anonymous and well-known commentators, bloggers, and social media activists. Both traditional media like the New York Times and new electronic media featured commentaries on the debate, which was documented by al-Qassemi on a blog under *Felix Arabia: Responses to Gulf Cities as New Arab Centres of Culture and Commerce Article*.⁹

In one reply, a journalist pointed to not only the lack of civilizational and historical depth of the new Gulf cities but identified an urgent issue, namely the transient human labour and the strict immigration rules that hinder long term attachment to these Gulf cities among the immigrants. 'Someone who does not feel a sense of belonging will not invest his or her full potential in such a city', observed Abbas al-Lawati.¹⁰ The new Gulf cities 'have produced few if any literary giants, scientists, academics or innovators. The achievements of expatriates, no matter how long they have lived there, are cast aside as non-indigenous and not celebrated with the fanfare that the most miniscule of achievements by the minority citizen population are'. Al-Lawati rightly drew attention to an old debate about the role of foreign labour, specifically from Asian countries, and the

⁸ Saudi Al-Jazirah newspaper announced that king Salman is the leader of the move to make Riyadh the capital of Arab decisions. <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2016/20160113/qr90.htm> accessed 17 June 2016. Saudi publicists announced the "Salman Doctrine", a foreign relation blueprint to counter the expansion of Iran through more vigorous regional and internal policies. See Nawaf Obeid, 'The Salman Doctrine: the Saudi Reply to Obama's Weakness', *The National Interest*, 30 March 2016.

⁹Thanks to Sooud al-Qassemi for making all the commentaries on his article available to me. <http://sultanalqassemi.blogspot.sg/2013/10/responses-to-gulf-cities-as-new-arab.html> accessed 17 June 2016

¹⁰Abbas al-Lawati "Gulf Cities have Long Way to Go Before Leading Arab World", Al-Monitor, 14 October 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/gulf-dubai-abu-dhabi-doha-arab.html> accessed 20 June 2016

precarious conditions under which most of this labour live in Gulf countries where foreigners can constitute up to 90 percent (Dubai) of the population.

Another commentator, Assad Abu Khalil, an established Lebanese political scientist in the USA, was more damning of the 'pretentious' claims that Gulf cities have replaced the old Arab capitals. Abu Khalil asks 'what contribution to Arab culture have those cities made, unless you are talking about sleaze, worship of the European, denigration of the Asians, promotion of singers purely based on breast sizes and lip thickness, prostitution mentality (literally and figuratively), gender segregation and repression, the culture of measuring humans by the size of their bank accounts, etc. Culture, what culture?' Although Al-Qassemi pointed that Gulf cities have yet to establish their political dynamism, Abu Khalil argues that 'Cairo and Beirut were known for hosting a culture that allowed (often despite desires of the ruling governments) various political and cultural trends to co-exist and to clash, and for the expression of divergent political viewpoints. Cairo and Beirut were cities that allowed artists and writers to seek refuge and to express themselves artistically and creatively, and there is none of that in the Gulf. Yes, academics and journalists are flocking to the Gulf but what have they produced there? What ideas? They go there and they work as assistants and propagandists in the entourage for this prince or that prince'.¹¹

A wider audience got engaged in the substance of the article, especially connected individuals on social media. A commentator replied to al-Qassemi's assertions by pointing out that "unlike business and finance, culture is not simply a matter of tangible figures, statistics and pretty buildings" (@JoyceA321).¹² These responses reflected a growing interest among people in business, finance, urbanism, and art to focus on the new Gulf. Journalists, policy makers, think tank advisers and academics have been debating the new Gulf regional foreign policies for more than a decade. Public relations pundits highlight the new Gulf era with a special focus on the material success story of Dubai, where a concentration of artistic events and cultural productions often take place, thus reflecting the changes that have taken place and shifts towards this small emirate. Others associate Doha with Al-Jazeera channel and support for the Islamists rather than patronage of the arts. The article about the identified four new cities continues to generate debate and controversy among observers of the Gulf and its role in the wider region and beyond.

This shift in favour of the Gulf is not new but dates back to the 1979 Camp David Agreement which removed Egypt from its historic position as the political centre of the Arab world, followed by the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 in response to the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Before that, the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia did not feature as a "new centre" but as a source of energy that the world depended on in the post-World War II era. Notwithstanding the ancient religious significance of Saudi Arabia for all Muslims, especially Mecca and Madina, without oil the country would have

¹¹ Assad Abu Khalil at Felix Arabia <http://sultanalqassemi.blogspot.sg/2013/10/responses-to-gulf-cities-as-new-arab.html> accessed 17 June 2016

¹² Felix Arabia at . <http://sultanalqassemi.blogspot.sg/2013/10/responses-to-gulf-cities-as-new-arab.html> accessed 17 June 2016

remained as marginal as it had been in the last four hundred years and its other cities would not have featured among any significant centre in the region.

If both Al-Qassemi and Abu Khalil agree that there is no political dynamism in the so-called new Gulf centres, three years after the former published his controversial and provocative article, it is certain that the historical political dynamism in the old Arab capitals has now been replaced by serious repression, sectarianism, violence and other devastating political and economic challenges. From Cairo to Baghdad where a thriving political culture had once existed, now there is entrenched violence, polarisation, and military dictatorships. In this respect, both the old and the new share a problematic so-called political culture in which dynamism is seriously in short supply. The volatile politics and violence in the old Arab world coexist with the dullness and subtle and often not so subtle repression in the new emerging Gulf capitals. Al-Qassemi admits that the new Gulf cities are still in need of a dynamic political culture such as political representation, respect for human, civil and political rights, pluralism and equality between citizens and expatriates. On several occasions, to his credit, al-Qassemi has advocated giving citizenship to expatriates in the UAE.

However, many citizens of the old Arab capitals would argue that it is precisely the multiple economic, religious, political and social interventions of the new Gulf that have rendered the old Arab capitals into peripheral zones, struggling on all fronts, including the economy, politics, society and culture. One commentator went as far as saying 'Alqassemi's brand of Gulf chauvinism discards the Gulf's role in the destruction of the culture of the Arabs his article insults.'¹³

Comments such as this one reflect a growing resentment among some Arabs of the negative consequences of the alleged Gulf role in the 'destruction of Arab culture'. Many Arabs have pointed out to the destructive roles of recent Gulf and mainly Saudi expansion in the region, specifically its spread of a radical version of Islam in north African and Levantine societies, allegedly setting back the gains of leftist and feminist movements. The vanishing Arab leftists and nationalists still blame Saudi Arabia for unleashing political Islam as a counter current to defeat their threat in the period 1950-1960. Many Arab intellectuals call for *inha al-haqaba al-saoudiyya*, an end to the Saudi era through circulating petitions online.¹⁴ They want to challenge Saudi control of Arab media and intervention in the domestic politics of several Arab countries from Cairo to Beirut. Today Saudi interventions from Cairo to Sanaa, Manama, Baghdad and Damascus, remain controversial among Arab constituencies who either celebrate or condemn them. The same applies to Qatar's role after the beginning of the Arab uprisings, especially in Egypt, and lately the UAE's intervention in Libya and Yemen.

No doubt there is an entrenched marginalisation in the old Arab regions of North Africa and the Levant where key states had historically enjoyed both political and cultural dominance not only regionally but also internationally. Take Egypt as a case study. In addition to being at the forefront of the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1948, it produced major intellectual and political trends that shaped the Arab world throughout the twentieth

¹³ Thabit al-Arabi @Ikhras, posted on Felix Arabia . <http://sultanalqassemi.blogspot.sg/2013/10/responses-to-gulf-cities-as-new-arab.html> accessed 17 June 2016

¹⁴ *Inha al-haqaba al saoudiyya* was an online petition to gather signatures on 22 September 2011. It is still available on shmsaljazeera.blogspot.sg after it was reported in London based *al-Quds al-Arabi*.

century. Modernity, anti-colonial struggle, military-coups, Arab nationalism, and Islamism all came to the Arab world through Egypt. Subsequently, in 2011, the uprising in Egypt shocked the Arab world, in particular the Gulf monarchs, sheikhs and emirs to the extent of mobilising all their resources to reverse the trend.¹⁵ Had Egypt been a relic from the past, Arab monarchs would not have over-reacted to the seismic shift in the largest Arab country in January 2011. Egypt was on the path to move from military dictatorship and one party rule to mass contentious politics, free elections and eventually the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power. This short-lived experience was brought to an end, thanks in part to Gulf interventions and of course Gulf money. The eclipse of Egypt was a function of the marginalisation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the shift towards the Gulf as the region for rivalry and tension since the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran to power in the 1980s. The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the 2003 American invasion of Iraq had all contributed to making the Gulf the emerging hegemonic centre. With the declining importance of Palestine as a cause, the main arbiter of this conflict, Egypt was destined to become marginal even before the turmoil it has experienced since 2011.

Unfortunately, there are no clear signs that the new Gulf capitals are beginning to develop a dynamic political culture while the rest of the Arab world is currently sinking deeper and deeper into a cycle of violence and turmoil. The new capitals have become urban centres for superficial neo-liberal consumption and real estate development. Development in cultural, social, and economic arenas came without diminishing their complete dependence on oil rent or moving beyond old traditional dynastic political practices. Despite the proliferation of liberalising and upgrading authoritarian rule,¹⁶ toothless and powerless elected councils, stifled civil society, and the superficial promotion of gender equality, the new Gulf centres are far from the political dynamism identified as in short supply by Sultan Al-Qassemi himself. A sensible young commentator, al-Qassemi thinks that improving the Gulf's record on human rights is more effective in ameliorating the image of these countries than the millions spent on public relations consultants in the West and elsewhere.

Five years after the first wave of the Arab uprisings, it must be said that repression in the old and the new Arab capitals is a new entrenched feature of the whole region.¹⁷ If there is anything shared between the old and the new, it must be the abysmal political culture of repression that prevails across the Arab world.

The controversy between those who celebrate the Gulf as the new Arab centre and those who doubt its authenticity and its capacity to make a genuine positive contribution to the region as a whole can be heated and expectedly may in some instances degenerate into abuse and racism among both advocates and opponents. In this debate it is easy for some

¹⁵Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Internal Dilemmas and Regional Responses to the Arab Uprisings', in F. Gerges (ed.) *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 353-379

¹⁶On the theme of liberalising and modernising authoritarian rule in many GCC, see a general discussion in Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Regime Resilience after the 2011 Arab Popular Uprisings', *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, volume 9, issue 1, 2016, pp. 13-26.

¹⁷Marc Lynch, *The Arab Thermidor: The Resurgence of the Security State*, 27 February 2015 at pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/.../POMEPS_Studies_11_Thermidor_Web.pdf accessed 1 March 2015.

analysts and commentators to sink into the contours of a new Arab Orientalism, an old ideological controversy between the so-called bedouins of the deserts, tents and camels on the one hand and those of the fertile lands of civilisation on the other.

Arguably, as academics, we must rise above the ideological new Arab-Arab Orientalist polemics such as the ones discussed above and explore the real and imagined shifts towards new Gulf international relations and transnationalism in the Middle East. Here I must make a distinction between international and transnational relations to sharpen our understanding of the two fields we aim to cover at this conference. As a legitimate research agenda, exploring Gulf international relations has always been a well-established field in International Relations, and it has gathered greater momentum since the Arab uprisings as a result of the increasing Gulf diplomatic, financial and military interventionist policies in the Arab world. Recently there has been great academic interest in the so-called new Gulf foreign policy. Conferences on Gulf inter-state relations within the GCC focus on the rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the GCC intervention in Bahrain, the aloof Omani position vis-a-vis several GCC monetary, military and unification initiatives, Oman's role in facilitating the US-Iranian nuclear agreement, and the 2015 UAE-Saudi military intervention in Yemen.¹⁸ Studies highlight GCC relations with other Arab states and the international community. Gulf assertiveness, in particular Saudi Arabia, for example in the United Nations, the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference is also the subject of great attention.

In addition to Gulf international relations, the study of Gulf transnational connections, in both their historical and contemporary inward and outward manifestations is also gathering momentum in Gulf studies.¹⁹ Transnationalism is understood as a different academic interest from both globalisation studies and international relations in which states and global businesses are the prime actors. In the transnational arena, the actors may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises, and in no small part it is this diversity of organisation that we need to consider.

Historically, the Gulf had always been a transnational hub as documented in the excellent scholarly work on the region and will continue to be so as featured in contemporary social scientific studies. The flows have always been a two way process with the Gulf receiving and exporting transnational connections in all directions, to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. From Omanis sailing to Zanzibar, Java and New York, central Arabian merchants transporting Najdi horses to Basra, Kuwait and Bombay (now Mumbai), to Hadrami entrepreneurs and religious scholars establishing diaspora communities in India and Malaysia and in the islands of Indonesia, so-called "Gulfies" have always been a transnational force beyond the Gulf.

¹⁸At LSE alone, several such conferences were held and many publications emerged from these meetings. See Karen Young, *The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC*, London: LSE Middle East Centre Series Papers, number 2, 2013.

¹⁹There is now growing sociological and anthropological literature on the flux of labour to Gulf cities and the conditions under which it lives. In addition, historical studies are beginning to highlight the transnational connections between the Gulf, Asia and Africa. See Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora*, Duke University Press, 2013; Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*. London: Routledge, 2005. On the construction of Gulf identities, see Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Gulf*, University of California Press, 2014.

The Gulf itself has also been recipient of transnational historical flows that made its indigenous population a mixture of ethnicities, races, and religions. Arabs, Africans, Persians, Asians and more recently Europeans have come to the region with their own cultural traditions and religious identities. From ancient Muslim pilgrims and settlers in Mecca, Banyan and Lawati merchants and bureaucrats in Muscat, to Persian merchants in Dubai and Doha, the whole of the Arabian Peninsula has exhibited diversity and pluralism, although both went unappreciated for various reasons. But recent academic studies of this ancient and recent transnationalism have contributed a great deal to understanding this region. Governments often ignored these historical facts in their quest to assert an Arab Muslim national identity but in the Arabian Peninsula the national has always been truly transnational. It seems that refined historical studies remain the enemy number one of national narratives.

Oil wealth in the second half of the twentieth century has only accentuated transnational connections. Here again, recent Gulf businessmen, and some non-Gulf nationals, in control of state sovereign funds and private wealth travel around the globe in search of new business investment opportunities. Gulf, mainly Saudi religious scholars and non-Saudi government functionaries, in search of global symbolic capital travel and deliver sermons as far as Mindanao in the Philippines. They establish religious centres, madrasah and charitable foundations as far as Jakarta and Tokyo and contribute to propagating Saudi Wahhabi-Salafi discourse. The Gulf has also produced problematic characters who have sought fame on the basis of claims to protect and defend the Muslim *umma* from aggressors. From Bin Laden, the son of a Hadrami immigrant in Saudi Arabia, to Saudi Jihadi Abu al-Khattab in Chechnya and Kuwaiti Sulayman Abu Gaith with al-Qaidah, the world encountered the religious zeal of new contributors to the Gulf transnational arena. We can assume that the Gulf was historically and is today the arena of transnationalism par excellence.

Both Gulf international and transnational relations should not always be seen through the prism of a zero-sum game. In other words, rising states in the Gulf and non-state stars should not always be constructed as a total eclipse of the old Arab world, its states and people. We must not forget that since the establishment of the Gulf states Arab nationals wrote Gulf constitutions, staffed the nascent government bureaucracies, dominated educational, judicial, and cultural institutions, and mediated Gulf political, economic, religious, cultural and media interests across the globe. Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Sudanese to mention a few have contributed to the rise of the Gulf in more than one field.

In studying the new so-called *al-haqaba al-khalijiyya*, the Gulf era, let's also not forget the non-Arab contributors to the relatively recent consolidation of Gulf political hegemony. Western, Asian, and African expatriates, military personnel, policing agents, professionals, entrepreneurs and labourers have all been instrumental in the consolidation of the new Gulf hegemony. Highlighting Arab and non-Arab contributions to the rise of the Gulf allows us to shift the discussion towards more nuanced and empirically based assessments of the current role of Gulf state and non-state actors in the Middle East. *Al-haqaba al-khalijiyya* is a truly transnational project, whose contributors have come from all over the world.

In the Gulf itself, spreading religious discourse, shaping Arab public opinion in the media, launching airstrikes in Libya and Yemen, and even policing Gulf citizens, we find a

consortium of participants who in addition to Gulf nationals belong to so many countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe in addition to Arabs from the old centres.

In this short paper, I cannot fully map the historical Gulf transnational dynamics in the wider Middle East region that had been unsurprisingly flowing in both directions rather than simply from the Gulf to the Middle East. Nor can I fully explore the consequences of the contemporary controversial and pervasive centrality of the Gulf in the Arab world after the 2011 uprisings.

I can only highlight Gulf responses to historical and contemporary transnationalism/expansion inside the Gulf itself. This will allow us to understand the variations over time and assess the long-term impact inside the Gulf and outside it.

Domestic Gulf Responses to Transnationalism

The entrenched historical and contemporary transnationalism of the Gulf has generated three discernible local responses if we adopt a diachronic view of the dynamics after state formation in the Gulf. The formation of GCC states prompted its leadership to imagine their “nations” in particular ways, then modify the national narrative to accommodate the speedy social, economic and cultural changes that have swept these countries in a very short period of time. As Brubaker argued, not only are different nations imagined in different ways, but the same nation is imagined in different ways at different times—indeed often at the same time, by different people.²⁰ Not all Gulf countries experienced these four responses in the same degree but it is perhaps accurate to say that all responses are felt at different historical moments.

First: given the pervasiveness of pre-state Gulf transnationalism, with the establishment of the Gulf states between 1932-1971 there was an urgent need to assert the Arab, Islamic and tribal character of the newly emerging polities. Consequently, the official narrative about the Gulf initially centred on the denial of the historical and contemporary transnational links, which led to mythologised assertions of uniformity of their Arab cultural identity, Islamic faith, and tribal genealogies. States used a plethora of iconography to assert Arabness, Islam, and tribe. It is claimed that ‘largely inward-looking and state led nationalism preoccupies itself with protecting and deepening a national identity’ was dominant.²¹ From tribal heritage festivals and poetry, seafaring pearl-diving culture, camel races, to Bedouin material objects, and animals (Falcons, Camels and Oryx), governments strove to fix the nation as a pure large Muslim Arab tribe, thus denying representation to the multiple ethnicities, cultures and traditions that had historically characterised the Gulf and were inevitably destined to increase with the discovery of oil and the flux of international labour to the region.

Among Gulf countries, the only exception is probably Oman, where there has been a recognition of the pluralism and diversity of the indigenous Omani population before the oil era, at least in the heritage industry under Sultan Qabus.²² The dominance of this kind of

²⁰ Rogers Brubaker, ‘In the Name of the Nation: Reflections on Nationalism and Patriotism’, *Citizenship Studies*, volume 8, number 2, 2004, pp. 115-127. Pp. 122.

²¹ Neil Partrick, *Nationalism in the Gulf States*, Kuwait Programme on Development and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Number 5, October 2009, London” LSE.

²²Madawi Al-Rasheed, ‘Transnational Connections and National Identity: Zanzibari Omanis in Muscat’. In P. Dresch & J. Piscatori (eds.) *Connections and Identities: Understandings of the Arab Gulf*. London: I.B. Tauris. pp.

nationalism has not been totally abandoned but as will be shown below, it has been impregnated with additional ingredients dictated by historical political circumstances. These circumstances force GCC leaders and their domestic and international heritage entrepreneurs, the master scribes of top-down national narratives, to gravitate towards other national constructions and highlight new dimensions in narrating their nations.

Second, the initial hype about Arabness/Islam/tribe began to gradually give way in the 1980s to a sub-regional identity centred on “Gulfness”, *khaliji*, thus reflecting the shift from a pan-Arab focus to a narrower construction distancing the Gulf from its wider Arab region. This was triggered by the rise of Iran as a regional competitor challenging Gulf security and the demise of Egyptian influence after the Camp David Agreement in 1979. The response was to set up the GCC in 1981 as an umbrella organisation to strengthen political, economic, security and social connections between certain countries in the Arabian Peninsula, excluding Yemen. *Khaliji* identity gathered momentum after Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait when all GCC states felt threatened by a powerful Arab neighbour. *Khaliji* identity was cast over a wide range of cultural, financial, military and social institutions and activities. This was meant to strengthen a sense of solidarity and commonality between member states and their commitment to each other as a political bloc different from other wider bloc such as the Arab League. As a result, *khaliji* identity was grafted onto sub-regional institutions and endeavours from banks to books.

Third, since the opening up of all Gulf economies to increasing trade and finance and away from state centred oil economies, there is a new response characterised by increasingly embracing a cosmopolitan Gulf and promoting it worldwide as such. This new invention of tradition uses old narratives and infuses them with a cosmopolitan dimension. The UAE was the mastermind of this new outlook.²³ Embracing mercantile cosmopolitanism has not been a driving force in, for example, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia for specific domestic reasons.²⁴ But in the UAE and Qatar, governments celebrate their newly constructed image as the transnational cosmopolitan centres of not only the Gulf but also the Arab world and certainly beyond. Nationalism is constructed not only as purely Islamic, Arab, Bedouin and maritime but is now an amalgamation of international and global trends. While these nationalist narratives do not automatically mean greater inclusion of the fragments that constitute these countries, they nevertheless remain

96-113.

²³In the UAE, falconry is constructed as an elite sport, entangled with a new nationalism in the UAE, targeting multiple audiences, including nationals, expatriates and the international community. See Natalie Koch, ‘Gulf Nationalism and the Geopolitics of Constructing Falconry as a ‘Heritage Sport’’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, volume 15, number 3, 2015, pp.522-539. See also Sulayman Khalaf, ‘Poetics and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in the Gulf: Camel Racing in the United Arab Emirate’, *Ethnology*, volume 39, number 3, pp. 243-61.

²⁴ Kuwait has yet to recover from the shock of the 1990 Iraqi invasion. At the same time, Bahrain has been entrenched with sectarianism and any transnationalism, especially that which highlights its Shia population’s connections with Iran is condemned. Saudi Arabia has always insisted on its Arab/Islamic heritage and denied the diversity of its population, especially in places like Mecca. Its annual Janadiriyya Heritage Festival celebrates folkloric elements of its diversity but does not recognise this diversity as important in its national narrative. See Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Isam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

focused on promoting a new image. It is ironic that the countries that have the least percentage of nationals (Qatar and the UAE) have opted for this cosmopolitan projection, mainly directed at the outside world, the financial global markets, and to a lesser extent the local expatriates. The new look is bound to attract more foreign nationals, seeking employment in the unique “cosmopolitan and sophisticated” rising star cities among GCC states.

After the Arab uprisings, these three responses are currently giving way to a fourth wave; namely hyper-nationalism needed for domestic and international reasons. The Arab/Islamic/tribal nationalism of the old era that immediately followed the establishment of the Gulf nation-states is returning as a hyper-nationalist trend, centred on militarisation (in the UAE and Saudi Arabia for example)²⁵ and sectarianism in Saudi Arabia.²⁶ Oman’s hyper-nationalism is different from these two countries as Oman continues to assert the independence of its foreign policy from the general Gulf consensus. Being hyper-nationalist Omani means maintaining sovereignty and independence against very powerful Gulf neighbours.²⁷ In Qatar, the recent construction of the Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab Mosque in Doha attests to the rivalry with Saudi Arabia over a common religious heritage as both countries project themselves as defenders of Sunni Islam. Qatar’s overt support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia’s propagation of itself as the bastion of Islamic leadership, albeit an old project, gathered greater momentum with the Arab uprisings and the consolidation of Iranian expansion in the Arab region. The two countries clashed over their sponsorship and support for different Islamic trends across the Arab world.

This hyper-nationalism is moulded by a series of Gulf initiatives, some of which have failed to materialise, for example the Saudi proposal for greater GCC unification to replace cooperation. Other initiatives are grounded in security arrangements, for example post-Arab uprisings common GCC security agreements, and anti-terror laws to mitigate against regional dissent. The main driver behind these initiatives is to preserve monarchy as a genre of government and inhibit young dissidents across the GCC from developing independent regional solidarities. GCC states currently worry about transnational Islamist Gulf solidarities, initiated by non-state actors,²⁸ for example the Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafi groups heavily represented in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and to a lesser extent the UAE and Oman. Another aspect of the new hyper-nationalism is its grounding not in Islam in general but in Sunni Islam in particular, a response to the rise of Iran, commonly known as the new ‘Shia crescent’. While this is especially evident in Saudi

²⁵ On Gulf nationalism, see Kirsten Diwan, ‘Soldiers and Nations’, 18 November 2015, at <http://www.agsiw.org/soldiers-and-the-nation/> accessed 18 June 2016.

²⁶ Madawi Al-Rasheed, ‘Sectarianism as Counter Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, volume 11, number 3, pp. 513-526. Also ‘Wahhabi Religious Nationalism Turns Ugly’, *Politico*, 27 November 2015.

²⁷ Oman resisted Saudi attempts at greater Gulf unification, military coordination and more recently facilitated the secret US-Iranian dialogue that led to the nuclear agreement and the partial lifting of sanctions on Iran. Saudi Arabia was annoyed by Oman’s secret role in this affair.

²⁸ After the Arab uprisings, Kuwait withdrew permission for an independent Gulf Youth Forum to be held in Kuwait, under pressure from Saudi Arabia and Salafi circles. See Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: the Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia*, London: Hurst & OUP, 2015.

Arabia, other countries, for example Kuwait and Oman, are reluctant to adopt such an overtly sectarian narrative given the sectarian diversity of their own local population.

Hyper-nationalism often reflects weakness rather than strength, anxiety rather than serenity, and fragility rather than firmness. The current insecurity of the Gulf, despite military spending, the acquisition of advanced weapons, surveillance technology and global expertise, and international support stems from the fact that the Gulf has lost its Arab depth (Egypt), the rise of Iran, and the recent shifts in American foreign policy. More importantly, the insecurity of the Gulf is above all a function of the new shift in the so-called old Arab capitals where mass contentious politics threatens to be contagious. The combination of dwindling wealth and mass politics remain the greatest threat facing the Gulf now.

In other words, a combination of social, economic, and political factors may be an undeniable consequence of current trends. Consequently, they may eventually trigger a “dynamic political culture”. Hyper-nationalism is adopted as an antidote to the emergence of this dynamic political culture, in which representative government and human rights are respected. Hyper-nationalism leads to assertions of identity, which in turn explains the recent Gulf aggressive foreign policy. The new populist hyper-nationalism-linked to both religious and military projects- is meant to enforce a sense of superiority and strength against uncertainty and weakness, in addition to loyalty to leadership and silencing of dissent. This promises to unite rulers and ruled, albeit momentarily. The sons of emirs and sheikhs die for the fatherland in battles and as do ordinary subjects, an image dominating the public sphere from television screens to print and social media. The unity between rulers and ruled has become a recurrent theme in the *watani* narrative especially in Saudi Arabia and the UAE since the beginning of their war in Yemen in 2015. In this militarised hyper-nationalism, all leadership is allegedly equal with all segments of society, and willing to die for the nation, thus masking domestic old hierarchies and inequality in wealth, especially at times of dwindling resources and welfare.

Regional Consequences of Gulf Expansion

All Gulf regimes have been particularly preoccupied with regime survival since the Arab uprisings. Therefore, their projection of power beyond their borders is determined and dictated by this important preoccupation. While their various diplomatic, financial, and military regional interventions are intended to maintain the status quo, their individual strategies in specific Arab countries are varied and can often be contradictory as they stem from their own domestic concerns rather than from a Gulf consensus. In order to secure their regimes, Gulf countries have adopted contradictory sets of projects in most Arab countries such as Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. Multiple state actors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have not always agreed on the outcome of their various interventions and consequently backed multiple Arab actors in countries like Egypt, Syria and Yemen. From Qatar’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to Saudi and UAE support of General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, there are ample differences and contradictions in foreign policy across the GCC states.

The contradictory projects of Gulf states in the Arab world may have a detrimental impact on local societies, widening the divide between Islamists and non-Islamists, strengthening the military against civilian governments, creating dependency on Gulf resources that reach the few, and generating new patron-client relations as a result of aid

to specific regime actors. Gulf interventions may have contributed in one way or another to the rise of militant Islamists across the region.²⁹ So far, it is difficult to find evidence of recent Gulf expansion leading to positive long-term democratic government from Bahrain to Cairo, not to mention Syria and Yemen. The intervention has been successful in only one area, suppressing the democratic impulses that accompanied the Arab uprisings.

Massive Gulf aid to Arab governments and the financial investments of non-state private sector actors have had mixed results. It definitely has not contributed to the alleviation of hardship across the region. Official aid and subsidies to other regimes are always tied to specific political agendas and have often been diluted by the corruption of recipients. GCC states have nevertheless alleviated some Arab economic difficulties, as migrant remittances from the Gulf reach large communities in the Arab world. Recently however, even this has come under strain as Arab migrants have been gradually replaced by cheap African and Asian labour since the 1980s and now they are less welcome, especially those citizens of Arab states deemed hostile.³⁰ Regional Gulf interventions can also be devastating at the humanitarian level; both Yemen and Syria are stark examples of how aggressive Gulf diplomacy and the sponsorship of proxy militia does not contribute to the stability of these countries but is more likely to generate further tensions, conflicts and civilian deaths. Gulf relief operations are well-advertised³¹ but the total collapse of state institutions in some Arab countries and the devastation of their citizens and infrastructure are beyond any immediate Gulf relief at the present.

Conclusion

After their construction as modern nation states, GCC countries have been stark examples of the national being truly transnational, despite national narratives that insist on the Arab/Islamic/tribal heritage. Historically, all Gulf states consisted of transnational communities, whose survival depended on the presence of multiple ethnicities. Such ethnic communities maintained links with the outside world and connected the Arabian Peninsula to trade, religious, and social networks beyond its boundaries. In the modern period and after the discovery of oil, these links intensified as a new wave of labour migration began to settle in GCC countries. The old and the new communities remained without serious recognition in the national narratives of individual countries. National narratives emerged

²⁹Saudi Arabia and Qatar have contributed most to arming Syrian rebels, although both countries insist that they help moderate rebels. Non-state Kuwaiti actors are accused of raising funds for radical al-Qaidah affiliates in Syria. The UAE plays an important role in undermining the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Libya. See Frank Gardner, 'Gulf Arabs 'Stepping up' arms support to Syrian Rebels', BBC 8 October 2015, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34479929> accessed 27 June 2016.

³⁰While Saudi Arabia increased its subsidies to Egypt since 2013, it has suspended its aid to the Lebanese government, accused of being dominated by Hizbollah. In the 1990s, the Saudi government expelled more than 1 million Yemeni workers in response to Ali Abdullah Salih's support of Saddam Hussein. The UAE has recently expelled many Lebanese nationals following the rift with Lebanon and in solidarity with Saudi Arabia.

³¹ UAE humanitarian aid in Yemen is a recurrent theme in the local press. It is reported that by October 2015, the Ministry of International Cooperation and Development raised \$142 millions. It coordinates its activities with King Salman Relief Centre. See <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/uae-raises-142m-in-aid-for-yemen-608521.html#.V2O2gFfgzdk> and <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/uae-assistance-helps-rebuild-yemeni-prostheses-center> accessed 16 June 2016

in the 1970s and continued to evolve. Today we encounter a hyper-nationalist and populist agenda, struggling to coexist with the old narrative of the 1970s, the *khaliji* identity of the 1990s, and the neo-liberal cosmopolitan outlook in some but not all GCC states.

This paper has pointed out the multiple historical and contemporary transnational connections, and the responses to these in the Gulf itself. Without reconciling the national and the transnational we fail to understand the trajectories of both the GCC and its relations with the wider Arab world and indeed beyond the region. However, for these countries to reach their real potential as political actors on the stage of a multipolar world, they have to seriously demonstrate their transformation into dynamic political cultures, without which their bid to exercise hegemony will only cost money and lives, and certainly lead to dissent and even conflict with neighbouring states and their nationals.

In a changing Arab world, only dynamic political cultures are appealing despite the recent set back characterised by entrenched authoritarianism, repression, and sectarianism. GCC states have contributed in one way or another to diverting the struggles of 2011, making some uprisings sectarian, and reversing others. True leadership requires a full embrace of democratic ideals that are suffocated by the accumulation of traditional unrepresentative politics in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed is a Visiting Professor at Middle East Centre of London School of Economics and Political Science and was a Visiting Professor at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore in 2016-17. She has written extensively about Islamism and terrorism in Saudi Arabia, the Islamist movement, globalization, religious transnationalism and gender. On Twitter: @MadawiDr