

Putting the Gulf on the Map: The Role of the Gulf Research Center in Foreign Affairs Analysis



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



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The role of think tanks and research organizations has grown significantly in recent decades with particular growth being witnessed in the non-Western world. While think tanks have played a more prominent role within the context of civil society organizations in the United States and Western Europe especially in the second half of the twentieth century, their role in other parts of the world remained limited and only emerged within the overall process of globalization and better advanced information and communication technologies. The Middle East is here no exception.

The situation was even less developed in the Gulf region where think tanks began to emerge slowly only starting in the 1980s. The King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies and Research in Saudi Arabia was one prominent example with its

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establishment in 1983. While in Kuwait and Bahrain, civil society organizations have been part of overall societal development slightly earlier, the situation was less developed in the other countries that made up the Gulf Cooperation Council. In that regard, new research institutes that emerged tended to be also government controlled or at least considered as semi-government entities. As the Gulf region gained in prominence within the overall context of Middle Eastern politics beginning in the 1970s when the first oil crisis catapulted the Arab Gulf states on to the attention of the world community, the situation of think tanks began to shift.

The Gulf Research Center was established in July 2000 at a time when the GCC states were emerging as important players within the broader

context of regional and international politics. What one can witness is the transition of the center of gravity towards the Gulf region and away from the traditional Arab-Israeli theatre that had dominated headlines in the 1960s and the 1970. After the 1973 oil crisis, momentous events that were to define much of the future trajectory of the entire Middle East occurred centered on the countries of the Gulf. This included the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, and the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq in August 1990. With the launching of Operation Desert Storm in early 1991 by a coalition led by the United States to liberate Kuwait, the focus of the international community as far as the Middle East was concerned became firmly set on the Gulf region. It would not change significantly for the next 3 decades. And it was in the context of this shift that the importance of establishing a research center to act as a focal point for knowledge about the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States was becoming increasingly evident.

With the Gulf region gaining in prominence, the ties of the GCC states to the rest of the world began to multiply. While the United States had replaced the United Kingdom as the main international actor involved in Gulf affairs from the time of the UK's withdrawal of its territories 'East of Suez' starting in 1968, other countries and organization also began to take notice of the emergence of the Gulf. In 1988, the European Community as it was known then and the Gulf Cooperation Council formalized a cooperation agreement to diversify their relations. Much of the emphasis was put on expanding economic ties but relations soon took on a political as well as a social dimension.

With the developments in the region dominating international headlines, countries such as the Soviet Union and Asian nations also began to pay attention to what was happening in the Gulf.

With the increasing multitudes of connections, being able to collect and analyze information about the GCC countries became a much-needed requirement.

“A Gulf perspective to better inform policy analysis and policy formulation”

One of the core objectives of the Gulf Research Center from the outset was to disseminate, within the Gulf region and globally, information relevant to the GCC states, for the benefit of society within the Gulf region and beyond. While think tanks operated in places such as Washington and London with a focus on the Middle East and the Gulf, their work and output reflected very much a Western point of view. The key element that was missing in the overall discussion about the Gulf was a regional perspective, a genuine reflection of how developments and events were seen from within. It thus became imperative to put forward a Gulf perspective to better inform policy analysis and policy formulation in those countries that began to interact more regularly with the GCC states. Until institution like the Gulf Research Center came along, such a point of view was not a part of the equation. Its emphasis would represent a key component in the GRC's success and effectiveness.

From the outset, the GRC identified numerous research areas and bundled them together into several key research programs: Economics, Energy, Politics, International Relations, Defense and Security, Environment and Science & Technology. While global factors affecting each program were considered and incorporated into the research, GRC remained first and foremost a Gulf Arab think tank and hence looked first at the critical issues for each program at how this impacted the GCC states. The core element became providing non-partisan, in-depth and trustworthy research about the region. With this as its guiding objective, the GRC quickly emerged as a preferred knowledge partner of both Arab and non-Arab organizations who wanted to enhance their

knowledge about the Gulf or improve their policy outreach to the region.

In terms of its research programs on international relations and foreign policy, the GRC established a set of activities around which the work of the Center was focused. The first and main component was the research output itself. With the diversified set of contributions ranging from policy analysis to in-depth research papers, the GRC soon put forward several initiatives that brought attention to critical issues impacting the security and stability of the Gulf. Some of the key ideas put forward included the proposal on the Gulf as a

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Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone, an initiative that was even picked up in the official deliberations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or the proposal on implementing a Military Transition Council for Syria, an idea put forward at the very outset of the Syrian conflict before the situation deteriorated to the dismal state of affairs that one is witnessing today. Other initiatives included the GRC's chairmanship of the Syrian Opposition Conference in Riyadh in December 2015 and November 2017, a Maritime Security Project, and a discussion on a GCC-EU Friendship Fund for the Tribal Regions of Pakistan (FATA). In addition, GRC policy ideas did not restrict themselves only to hard core security topics but also reached into issues of wider development and sustainability. The Green Gulf 2020 Project was a first systematic attempt at outlining an environmental agenda for the Gulf region and the project served as a foundation for discussion on a common green agenda with other research think tanks worldwide.

A second component was the holding of international conferences and forums through which the GRC not only developed a wide-ranging network with like-minded institutions but was able to also take the discussion about the Gulf into other parts of the world. While there was an initial focus on Europe, soon the GRC also conducted activities in places such as the United States, South Africa, Singapore, Japan, India and Turkey. Many of the events organized and put together proved innovative and served as a precursor to relations that up to that stage had not been discussed very much. The GCC-Swiss Forum held in September 2013 and two Gulf-Africa meetings that included the participation of heads of state and government ministers can be listed here as prominent examples. In addition to such high-profile events, the GRC further joined with international partners to hold specialized workshops on topics of importance and relevance when it came to the Gulf. This included joint work with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Bertelsmann Foundation, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP), the Henry L. Stimson Center, the Nixon Center, Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po), Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE) and Kobe University, Japan, among others.

Two event activities deserve a special mention here. The first is the annual Gulf Research Meeting (GRM) held at the University of Cambridge in the UK that since its inauguration in 2010 has become the largest specialized academic gathering on the Gulf region. Overall, the GRM has brought together more than 3,500 participants in more than 130 workshops and resulted in more than 60 edited books being published. Many of the workshops held at GRM have had a foreign policy focus with key contributions on GCC-Asia relations and the Gulf's emerging ties with Latin America. The second series of events were the annual "Gulf and the

Globe" conferences during which the GRC undertook a systematic evaluation of the status of relations between the GCC states and different parts of the world. The unique format of this event allowed a thorough analysis not only of existing and traditional ties of the Arab Gulf states to places like the US, Europe and Asia but also took on board new and emerging relationships for example with the CIS states and Africa.

“Developed a wide-ranging network with like-minded institutions”

Through its network, the GRC was able to link with leading think tanks worldwide in turn providing unparalleled access and an ability to influence public policy discussions. Examples include the GRC inclusion in the Council of Councils, an initiative of the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, that comprises twenty-six major international policy institutes to facilitate dialogue on global governance and multilateral cooperation. The council draws on the best thinking from around the world to find common ground on shared threats, build support for innovative ideas, and introduce remedies into the public debate and policymaking processes of member countries. The GRC has also been part of the Strategic Studies Network (SSN), a partnership of institutions from North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of the relationship among politics, natural resources, economics, diplomacy, and military power. The goal of the Network has been to facilitate frank and informed dialogue and research among strategic studies centers on both traditional and non-traditional security challenges facing the region. Finally, the GRC became part of the Network of Democracy Research Institutes (NDRI), a global network of think tanks that conduct research and analysis on democracy, democratization, and related topics in comparative government and international affairs.

A third key component within the research programs on foreign policy issues has been the major project work has been undertaken and completed. Here, the ties between the GCC and the EU stand out as the GRC has successfully concluded several projects with the European Union. Examples include the Al-Jisr project on EU-GCC Public Diplomacy and Outreach Activities conducted from 2007 to 2009; Promoting Deeper EU-GCC Relations held in the years 2012 and 2013; and the GCC-EU Clean Energy network held from 2010 to 2012 in order to promote cooperation on clean energy and related policy and technology aspects among interested stakeholders in the EU

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and GCC countries. The GRC was further involved in several other consortium projects including the POLINARES consortium analyzing competition and collaboration in access to oil, gas and mineral resources; the SECURE (Security of Energy Considering its Uncertainty, Risk and Economic implications) Consortium undertaking a wide-ranging study on European Energy Security; and as Task Leader in the Task Leader, INCONET-GCC2 project to establish a science, technology and innovation international cooperation network between the EU and Arab Gulf countries.

As one of the first public diplomacy project on EU-GCC relations, the Al-Jisr project and its associated activities significantly added to the visibility of the policies of the European Union in the Gulf region, and led to a more thorough understanding of the issues that constitute the overall EU-GCC relationship. Noteworthy highlights of the project included three training sessions that brought together over 100 GCC nationals to provide insights into the workings of the European Union;

seven area specific workshops covering the issues of education, energy and the environment, political reform in the GCC countries, the status of regional security cooperation, and EU-GCC relations in the context of global economic developments; over 20 publications including policy briefs that provided concrete policy recommendations to both EU and GCC officials; the production and discussion of nearly 40 research papers within the larger research project on diversification of the GCC economies and the opportunities for the EU; and for the first time, the translation of textbooks on the policies and institutions of the European Union into Arabic, including one volume which was translated from German into Arabic.

While a core focus area of the GRC was on developing the relations between the EU and the GCC, the project work was not just limited to the EU. Other notable involvement included project work with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada; the Centre for Economic and Policy Research for the Global Trade Alert Project; the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), NATO, the World Economic Forum, the World Trade Organization, the Japanese Institute of Energy Economics (JIME) and the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), Finland.

Numerous other aspects could be mentioned here that have further contributed to a better understanding of the GCC states when it comes to their foreign and security policies. The environment in which the GRC operates continues to be challenging and diverse. With developments such as the Arab Spring, the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal and the subsequent withdrawal of the United States, the volatility in world energy markets and more recently the unprecedented implications associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, underline that the role of the Gulf Research Center as an independent, non-partisan think tank providing objective, balanced yet critical analysis continues to be critical.

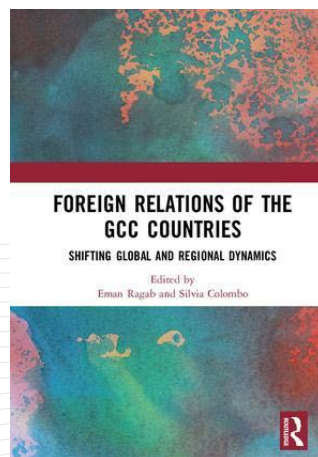
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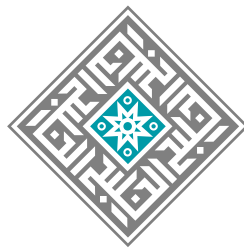
In all of its work, the GRC remains dedicated to providing ideas and initiatives that contribute to the security and stability of the Gulf region and to the prosperity of the people of the region. It is a unique institution with a unique role to play. A final example will suffice to underline the important role the GRC fulfills. In September 2018, the GRC launched the Tafahum project together with the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the support of the German Federal Foreign Office. The project pursues the overall objective of developing a roadmap for regional security in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula that includes the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran, Iraq and Yemen. The project aims to generate an overall “understanding” (or tafahum) among regional stakeholders on a joined process towards regional

security in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. With its scope of work and associated activities, the Tafahum project is an integral component of a much-needed initiative. It exemplifies more than anything else what the Gulf Research Center is about and the impact that the Center has had on promoting peace and security in a critical part of the world.

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Looking at 20 years in existence, the Gulf Research Center has succeeded in the objectives it has originally set for itself. Because of its work and outreach, there exists today a better understanding and deeper appreciation of the role of the GCC states in global affairs. Given that this mission does not end, the GRC will certainly remain at the forefront of many of the debates concerning the Gulf region for years to come.





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