

The Gulf Research Center Cambridge



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



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Gulf Research Center

Introduction:

The Gulf Research Center (GRC) is the single most prominent Gulf-based research institution that focuses on the Gulf region. GRC was instrumental in promoting studies and research on the Gulf and enhancing global academic interest in this strategic region. It was rather a striking observation that, despite the growing importance of the Gulf in the global stage, at the time of the GRC's founding in the year 2000, there was a widespread knowledge gap about the region. In academia, the Gulf region was largely treated at best as an appendix to Middle Eastern studies. Overall, there were only a handful of academics and researchers who were working on Gulf related matters and the region remained an academic enigma and beyond bound for analysts and researchers. The dearth of knowledge and the lack of academic and research interest on the Gulf were more pronounced among the young generation and especially among those from the region itself. Conducting Gulf studies and carrying out research on the region was met with many obstacles, and beyond the lack of interest there was also a scarcity of academic literature, resources and research meetings for those involved in the subject.

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The reality was that this anomaly had to be corrected, and Gulf studies had to be given its due recognition and its real weight and value. Building on the astounding success of the Gulf Research Center (GRC) since its inception in 2000 by the

founding Chairman and philanthropist Dr. Abdulaziz Sager in promoting academic and research interest within the region, the next stage was for the GRC to take the idea global and to the next level by facilitating and integrating with the global academic community, thus, living up to its maxim – “Knowledge for All”.

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That vision included establishing and building research capacity and scholarly interest at one of the world's leading academic and research institutions, the University of Cambridge. GRC Cambridge was established with the collaboration with the University of Cambridge in 2010, and its Annual Gulf Research Meeting held at this prestigious university is also celebrating its 10th year anniversary while GRC itself is commemorating its 20th anniversary since its establishment. Throughout the past twenty years, the Gulf Research Center and its affiliates have grown from a creative regional idea to becoming a globally recognized research center with universal networks that have contributed much to the understanding of the Gulf region with the ultimate mission of promoting understanding, dialogue, peace, security, prosperity and sustainability not only in the Gulf region itself, but also globally.

The inspiration of the idea in creating the Gulf Research Center Cambridge:

Inspiration comes in many ways and forms and from different sources both internal and external, but it requires a receptive, motivated and dedicated mind with passion, drive and determination to make it a reality and lots of hard work to make it succeed. There are always numerous obstacles and variables at play but nothing stops Dr. Abdulaziz Sager in pursuing his mission and achieving his objectives. To demonstrate this, I want to share my own experience in working with Dr. Sager in establishing the Gulf Research Center Cambridge.

I was once invited to attend a GRC event and I had the pleasure of sitting at the conference dinner with Dr. Sager himself. At the time, I was working at the University of Cambridge, and given my research interest in Gulf studies, I had the pleasure of already knowing Dr. Sager for several years. During the dinner conversation, we talked about the need to promote Gulf studies and research on the Gulf in Europe and beyond. Cambridge was an obvious choice and for many reasons. Founded in 1209, the University of Cambridge's 800-year history makes it the fourth-oldest university in the world and the second-oldest university in the English-speaking world. Cambridge is also one of the best universities in the world and is consistently in the top rankings as being the best choice for education, reputation, research and academic excellence.

The following day we had a formal meeting and we were joined by a number of top GRC research directors including Prof. Giacomo Luciani, Dr. Christian Koch, Dr. Oskar Ziemelis and Dr. Mustafa Alani. We formally discussed the idea of setting up the Gulf Research Center Cambridge to promote the overall GRC mission and objective of promoting

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scholarly endeavours and research in Gulf studies. It didn't take long after our discussions before Dr. Sager and Prof. Luciani came to visit Cambridge and we met with the top university administration to explore the idea. The university welcomed the approach and offered its support and accepted the affiliation.

As a consequence, the Gulf Research Center Cambridge was established as a charitable organisation with a board of trustees from the University of Cambridge, GRC and other prominent academics in Middle East and Gulf Studies, to provide an academic environment to foster Gulf studies and to encourage scholarly and academic exchange among those working on or interested in the developments that are taking place and defining the Gulf region and its constituent societies.

Until I left Cambridge in 2012, I had the honour of acting as Director of the Gulf Research Center Cambridge and worked with the board of trustees and my colleagues at GRC and the University of Cambridge to develop the mission and objectives of the center. As the main objective was to develop scholarly interest and build research capacity on the Gulf region, we worked together to initiate the idea of holding a GRC-funded annual research meeting in Cambridge.

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The research meeting was designed to have a number of focused academic workshops. The idea and the theme of the workshops themselves was put on an open global call for organising and directing them, ensuring that each workshop has more than one directors coming from different institutions. The proposals to direct workshops are then thoroughly evaluated by an academic committee in terms of relevance, coherence and contribution to knowledge. In an effort to enhance global cooperation and ensure regional presence and participation, certain preferences are given to workshop proposals that combine directors from different institutions and especially from the Gulf region. Following the vetting and the selection of the workshop proposals, an international call for papers is announced to ensure wider participation. Workshops directors are entrusted to evaluate paper proposals with no input from the Gulf Research Meeting team. Throughout both the international calls for workshops and papers, a great deal of proposals are received from a variety of nationalities, topics, opinions and views and only workshops that attract a suitable number of quality paper proposals are finally approved. It was observed that numbers for proposed workshops and papers kept increasing each year and with it the number of young and budding scholars especially from the Gulf region. On average, 10 to 15 workshops are held every year each with at least 10-20 research papers. Over the last 10 years there have been thousands of participants who presented in hundreds of workshops scattered around various historic and beautiful Cambridge colleges.

The Gulf Research Meeting highlights critical issues of importance to the Gulf region and provides a basis for undertaking and engaging in academic and empirical research in the fields of Gulf international relations, politics, economics, energy, environment, security and the wider social sciences. The workshops are held in parallel, with each dedicated to a specific theme/topic.

The Gulf Research Meeting has provided factual and insightful information about the region while promoting mutual understanding between the Gulf and the rest of the world. Particular emphasis is given to encourage young scholars, in particular from the GCC countries in addition to Yemen and Iraq, including those studying abroad, to engage in the debate and take part in research collaboration. Furthermore, the workshops promote various research efforts among institutions from within the Gulf and other parts of the Gulf to heighten awareness of Gulf specific issues.

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Young scholars find presenting their research papers in small and intense workshops over three days while testing their views among colleagues a very useful tool for gaining confidence in public speaking, presenting and benefiting from the extensive discussions and the critical reviews of their papers. Participants are given time to improve their papers after the meeting with a view of publication.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Gulf Research Meeting has become a landmark on the calendar of scholars interested in the Gulf region. Besides being a valuable academic and research opportunity, the Gulf Research Meeting also offered a venue for social networking and building contacts among Gulf scholars from around the world and an opportunity to meet each other and get to know about everyone's research interests, which has immensely increased global interest in Gulf studies and enhanced and deepened both personal and institutional cooperation, fulfilling the objective of the GRC in widening knowledge and enhancing global interest and cooperation in Gulf studies.

Participants at the annual Gulf Research Meetings have also included officials, policy makers, business people as well as established and budding academics who take advantage of the extremely valuable networking opportunities.

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Although difficult to recount the names and numbers of the high-level attendants of GRM, it will suffice to say that a large number of Gulf royal families, princes, members of Shura Councils, heads and members of regional and international organisations including the GCC Secretary General, ministers and deputy ministers, civil servants, university chancellors and presidents, college deans, bankers, business people, civil society organisations, etc. have attended past meetings, in addition to highly accomplished scholars and academics.

The Future of Gulf Studies and the Gulf Research Center-Cambridge:

The Gulf Research Center Cambridge through its annual Gulf Research Meeting (GRM) took Gulf studies to a different level. Over its 10 years, it provided a platform for free academic exchange to

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foster and enhance interest in Gulf studies and to encourage cooperative scholarly and academic exchange among those working on Gulf related subjects. Held on the beautiful grounds of the historic University of Cambridge, it raised the profile of Gulf studies and gave it another dimension. The professional management of GRM and the level of research has made it become one of the most sought-after academic events to attend and it became a trademark for Gulf studies. The increasing applications and interest in attending GRM attest to this fact.

Indeed, GRC has played a major role to elevate Gulf studies from simply a niche speciality to being at the forefront of area studies. Students, researchers and academics from around the world who specialise on the region appreciated the importance of their work and their speciality and found a reason to celebrate their achievement and impart and exchange their knowledge at GRM. Participants also enjoyed the rigorous process of selection and the critical review of their papers, which helped them to get their papers published. Publishing is always a desired objective of academics and GRM provided that opportunity.

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In conclusion, I must say that in life, personalities and people make all the difference, and certainly the Chairman of GRC, Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, who had a vision and aspiration to promote scholarly and research interest in the Gulf region has contributed a great deal to awarding Gulf studies its due standing in the area of social science globally. Despite that, the subject is still very much understudied. GRM is and will continue

to contribute to filling the knowledge gap given the devotion, commitment and dedication of its Chairman. Such noble efforts need to be supported, and his efforts and deeds and his investments in terms of efforts, time and money need to be recognised. I am personally glad to have played a small part in supporting his vision and will continue to play a useful role as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Gulf Research Center Cambridge.

