

# Two Decades of Research on the Gulf: The GRC's Continued Mission of Ensuring Gulf Representation in Global Research on International Affairs



**Gulf Research Center**  
Knowledge for All



**Aileen Byrne**

**Senior Researcher  
Gulf Research Center**

The Gulf Research Center's research activities have been at the core of its mission since its establishment in the year 2000, when at that time, the organization was truly a pioneer in promoting and producing research specifically focused on the Gulf region. Dr. Abdulaziz Sager recognized that the Gulf as a region and the countries within it, i.e. the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council in addition to Iraq, Iran and Yemen, were not only under-researched globally within international think tanks and academic institutions, but that there was a complete lack of a regional voice within that international discourse and within the limited scholarly publications that did include a Gulf element. In establishing the Gulf Research Center, Dr. Sager's vision at the time was to fill this void in available research in both English and Arabic on the Gulf region by launching a variety of research programs dedicated to various topics that impact the Gulf region, and by engaging in regular studies and analyses on these dynamics, always keeping in mind GRC's mission of "knowledge for all," which reflected his vision of having a wide variety of accessible and high-quality research on the Gulf region widely available to the public. Most importantly, the Gulf Research Center has fulfilled its commitment in ensuring that the Gulf region is represented in the international think tank and international research community, not only on issues that specifically affect the Gulf, but also in the global discourse on issues that impact the wider Arab World and the international affairs as a whole. Research dealing with international affairs

remains disproportionately funded and carried out by Western think tanks and academic institutions, and therefore the GRC's role in providing a Gulf perspective within global research output is absolutely crucial to ensuring that available research and analysis on international affairs is inclusive, especially on issues that directly affect the Gulf itself.

## “Regional voice that carries out research on issues of importance to the Gulf”

In fulfilling its role as a regional voice that carries out research on issues of importance to the Gulf, research and analysis at the Gulf Research Center has also distinguished itself in branching out from the topics that typically dominate Western scholarship on the Gulf region, i.e. the oil market, Gulf relations with the West and especially the United States, and regional security. Of course, these topics have been well represented within GRC research as they are of importance to the region, yet over the past two decades, the GRC has been at the forefront of innovative research on many other previously ignored topics such as Gulf relations with Latin America, Africa and Asia, in addition to in addition to dedicating an entire research program to migration and the labor market in the Gulf. The GRC was also one of the first research centers to study renewable energy and environmental issues in the Gulf, looking at energy issues in a much broader context years before the various GCC countries drafted their vision programs for economic diversification.

## “Launching a variety of research programs dedicated to various topics that impact the Gulf region”



Furthermore, the GRC has carried out research and publications on all aspects of Gulf domestic politics and society, and being a Gulf-based think tank has proven especially important in its legitimacy in this area of research in particular, which has included topics such as demographic studies, the role of the internet and social media in the Gulf, state-society relations, youth studies, education policy and gender studies. Being based in the region has allowed the GRC to significantly contribute to this area of research, having access to the data that is necessary to carry out these studies.

**“The Gulf Research Meeting remains the largest annual academic conference solely focused on the Gulf region”**

Notably, in the last twenty years since its founding, GRC research programs have produced nearly 300 book and journal publications and more than 1000 external research contributions. It would be impossible to discuss GRC's contributions to research on the Gulf without highlighting the annual Gulf Research Meeting, which GRC established in 2010 and last year celebrated its 10th annual gathering at the University of Cambridge. The Gulf Research Meeting remains the largest annual academic conference solely focused on the Gulf region, and is often cited as being the highlight of the year to scholars from around the world whose research focuses on the Gulf. In hosting the Gulf Research Meeting, the GRC has created this important and unique platform to foster global research collaboration among young and emerging scholars and more well-established

scholars, both from within and outside the Gulf. This was unprecedented at the time of its establishment, and since then, the conference has successfully held over 120 research workshops, leading to over 1500 peer-reviewed academic papers on the Gulf in some aspect.

**“The Gulf Research Center has developed six major research and analysis programs”**

From the year 2000 until today, the Gulf region, along with the wider Middle East and the entire world have experienced societal shifts in addition to global crises and other major changes and upheavals such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the rise of the internet and social media, the September 11 Attacks and subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which led to major shifts in Gulf regional security dynamics, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the 2011 uprisings and revolutions across the Arab World, increased Iranian aggression and proxy wars in the region, the global shift towards renewable energy, and now in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic and incoming economic crisis. These events would have taken place regardless of whether the Gulf Research Center had existed, however GRC research has ensured that issues specific to the Gulf remained relevant throughout and in the aftermath of these events. GRC is proud that its research and analysis has been at the forefront of these discussions, not only for those within the region who want to understand how these global issues affect the Gulf,

but also through working with think tank and academic partners from around the world to ensure that the important role of the Gulf countries as international players is adequately reflected in research on international affairs.

Since its establishment, the Gulf Research Center has developed six major research and analysis programs, which on touch on all elements impacting policy-making in the Gulf, including themes such as political systems and development, foreign relations of the Gulf, defense and security issues, the economy, as well as environmental issues and the role of energy and its regional and worldwide dimensions. In each of its research programs, it is the objective of the GRC and its extensive community of researchers and contributors to shed light on unexplored issues and relationships that are and will be of increased importance both for the Gulf region and the rest of the world. Each of the research areas is structured to encourage the dissemination of original research and to serve as an information resource base where all materials necessary for a solid understanding of an area of interest come together, involving the research and analysis itself, which often leads to book or article publications, in addition to conferences and workshops and executive learning programs, which serve to highlight both ongoing research and publications and also are an opportunity to discuss and collaborate on topics that should be explored further in additional research.

One of the GRC's oldest and most established research programs is its Gulf Foreign Relations research program, whose focus

## “Shed light on unexplored issues and relationships that are and will be of increased importance”

has been the interaction of the Gulf states with the rest of the world both regionally in the wider Middle East and globally. Within this research area, GCC foreign relations with a number of countries and regions are analyzed in order to be able to adequately and comprehensively understand the dynamics that are driving the foreign policies of the Gulf States, the issues and developments that are determining the direction of those relations, and how the individual and bilateral ties are impacting the broader regional environment. This research area comprises a number of sub programs which include Gulf Relations with the European Union, Gulf Relations with Asia, Gulf Relations with Africa and Gulf-US relations, but it has also carried out extensive research on the previously under-researched area of Gulf relations with Latin America and Gulf relations with specific countries within those regions.

Due to the critical role of oil in the Gulf economy, GRC's Gulf Economics and Energy research program has carried out some of GRC's most acclaimed research and analysis globally. Special attention in the research program is given to the still paramount oil and gas sector and the extension of its value chain into petrochemicals,

refining and energy intensive industries such as aluminum. Other diversification attempts in trade, services and tourism are also analyzed, with a special emphasis on renewable and nuclear energy. Areas of interest include regulatory and business environments, capital markets and trade relations (e.g. WTO, FTAs), the future of global energy supply and demand, the organization of the international oil and gas markets, alternative energies such as renewables, and now especially, economic diversification and national transformation programs.

**“GRC’s Politics and Society research program has been instrumental in shaping the way the world understands social dynamics in the Gulf region”**

The GRC’s Gulf Labour Markets and Migration Program has also been one of its most influential thanks to its international dimension in collaborating as a joint program with the Migration Policy Centre in Florence. It provides data, analyses, and recommendations contributing to the improvement of understanding and management of Gulf labor markets and migration, engaging with and respecting the viewpoints of all stakeholders. Key elements of the program include taking a comprehensive view, including demographic, economic, legal, social, political, and

administrative aspects of labor markets and migration, collecting all relevant data and documents, first and foremost those produced in the countries of the GCC and also in the countries of origin, conducting sound academic research and contributing to the development of the field of inquiry, presenting policy analyses, and engaging in dialogue with all stakeholders to discuss research findings. Its research has led to a number of analytical papers and books on Gulf migration and labor market issues. In addition, the program has its own website which features an ever expanding set of data and documents relating to the GCC’s labor markets.

Taking into considering that global research on energy in the Gulf tends to exclusively focus on the oil market, GRC’s Environment Security & Sustainability research program has been at the forefront of advancing research and analysis on environmental issues in the Gulf region, documenting relevant and related information about specific concerns related to the Gulf, in order to deepen the awareness and understanding of key environmental issues such as trends in the state of environment and natural resources in the Gulf and their natural, social and economic drivers, major environment and sustainability initiatives and environmental threats such as water, desertification as well as climate change and C&D debris.

The GRC’s Politics and Society research program has been instrumental in shaping the way the world understands social dynamics in the Gulf region, and especially Saudi Arabia, whose society is often misrepresented in Western research and analysis due to a historical lack of understanding and exposure to the country.



Throughout the last twenty years, this research program has explored themes related to culture and demographics and social issues such as education, gender studies, youth, media, history and civil society, in addition to political systems such as Gulf constitutions, legislatures, judiciaries, executive systems, political and social movements, and human rights.

Finally, the GRC Security and Defense research program has focused on the latest security developments in the Gulf states, including the six GCC member states, Iran, Iraq and Yemen, in addition to the neighboring region of South Asia and especially Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has dealt both with hard and soft security issues with a special focus on counter-terrorism, nuclear development and Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Gulf, regime stability, maritime security, narcotics and human trafficking. Its activities have included analysis, forecasts and situation reports in Arabic and English, monitoring terrorist activities and latest military developments, and studying critical strategic and security developments.

It would be impossible to detail all of the ways that the GRC has significantly contributed to research on the Gulf region. However, it is important in this 20th anniversary issue to highlight various achievements and groundbreaking research studies that the GRC has carried out over the last two decades, including research achievements in the early years of the GRC. A major highlight of those early years was the creation of the Gulf Yearbook series, which the GRC published annually from 2003-2009, and which was unprecedented in the way it comprehensively covered all key political, economic, social and strategic challenges that defined developments in the Gulf region in a particular year. Putting together

each edition required extensive research into primary sources, and the volumes produced as a result continue to stand as important reference materials on the Gulf for the years that they covered. For example, if one wants to have a better understanding of the political dynamics in the Kuwaiti parliamentary elections of 2008, one can easily refer to the Gulf Yearbook of that year, which reflects the volumes' relevance even today.

## “ Early years of the Gulf Research Center also saw significant research achievements in the area of regional security ”

The early years of the Gulf Research Center also saw significant research achievements in the area of regional security. An example of this was the Radicalization: Transnational Linkages, Causes and Effects research study, which was an unprecedented study looking at the process of radicalization, focusing on Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan. The objective was to understand the extent and strength of networks aimed at recruitment for terrorist activities. The project study analyzed the evolution of the radicalization process, epicenters of key groups, source of funding, sponsorship and proxy organizations. Similar to this study, the GRC research study on violent non-state actors explored the relationship between violent non-state actors and the environment that creates and nurtures them.

It applied an integrated approach informed by literature on the subject but also by adopting a critical and distinctive approach in addition to adding key data gathered from the ongoing activities of contemporary VNSAs. The project output was both normative and empirical, embodied in the work of distinguished scholars with extensive experience in their areas of expertise. Finally, early GRC research on regional security included its participation in a multi-country research study called INFOCORE, which carried out thorough research on the role of media in violent conflict and in shaping conflict perceptions and responses.

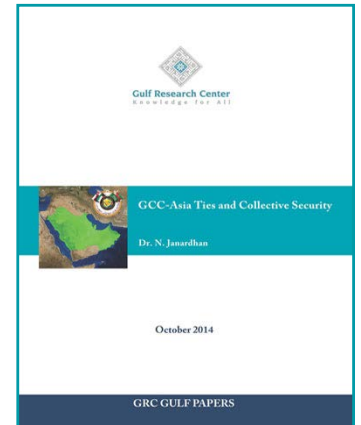
Furthermore, being a Gulf-based think tank offering a regional perspective, it has always been important for the Gulf Research Center, whenever possible, to provide research and analysis content in Arabic, not only to reflect its regional priorities, but to also give those who come from the region itself access to high-quality research content in their native language Arabic, which is the official language of all countries in the region. For this reason, Araa Magazine, which publishes monthly research and analysis in Arabic on all issues dealt with by GRC research programs, has been instrumental in ensuring the availability Arabic content to its wide readership. In addition to carrying out research and analysis in Arabic, through the translation of books and important scholarly publications from English into Arabic, GRC has also enabled its Arabic-speaking audience to access critical research on international affairs from non-GRC institutions.

Finally, as already mentioned, the conception of the Gulf Research Meeting and its ten years of holding successful conferences has allowed the Gulf Research Center to increase its research output exponentially by inviting external scholars

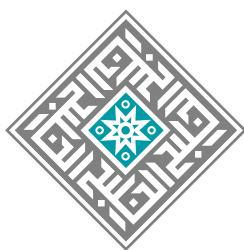
specializing in the Gulf to carry out research under the umbrella of the Gulf Research Center. It was initially established to provide an academic environment to foster Gulf studies and to encourage scholarly and academic exchange among those working on or interested in the developments that are taking place and defining the Gulf region and its constituent societies. Taking place within the historic outlines of the University of Cambridge, each 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 politics, economics, energy, security and the wider social sciences. Through parallel running workshops dedicated to specific topics, the Gulf Research Meeting provides 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.

## “Promoting mutual understanding between the Gulf and the rest of the world”

As we start off a new decade with a global pandemic that is affecting countries around the world indiscriminately, and which has already had devastating economic consequences including a steep decline in global oil prices, it is clear that targeted research on the Gulf and how the Gulf is impacted by world events will remain relevant in the years to come. The Gulf Research Center remains committed to its original mission of contextualizing these events in terms of their relevance to and impact on the Gulf region, and providing high-quality research and analysis in both English and Arabic through its various research programs and global partnerships, and engaging with a new generation of Gulf scholars from around the world.







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