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THE GCC: ATTEMPTS AT SUB-REGIONALISM IN THE PERSIAN GULF?

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ABSTRACT

Regionalism plays the significant role to shape the world order. In one hand globalisation attracts attention in the study of world politics, on the other, regionalism considers regions as the basic element of world politics. However, it is still difficult to conceptualise region as scholars divide whether geographical proximity or cognitive and ideational factors or both perceptions form a region. Under such backdrop, this paper will epitomize the formation of an international organisation by six Persian Gulf countries in the form of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). These countries have a similar religious view, geographical proximity as well as similar objectives with joint destiny. Since its establishment, the GCC remains an instrumental actor of the region's political and economic landscape although its performance is criticised and often branded as a failed or incomplete integration of states. Therefore, the paper enumerates the reasons behind the GCC's regionalism. Analysing the security issues and socio-economic affairs, the paper points out the main challenges faced by the organisation and offers policy implications in brief.

INTRODUCTION

Regions, regionalism and regionalisation matter.¹ Though precise definitions still remain contested, regions have become a principal concern of International Relations. Presently the global reality is, 'almost every country in the world has chosen to meet the challenge of globalization in part through a regional response.'² Regions normally endow with a major complimentary layer of governance, important enough that regionalism in fact outline world order. To cut things in short, regionalism is all about working together to achieve common goal(s) and improve quality of life. It is significant since it has been proven to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of local governments. Strengthening autonomy, improving bargaining power and promoting individual economies might be marked as the real magnetism of regionalism.

Regarding almost identical historical experiences and religio-cultural similarities, the Middle East eventually can be considered as a region. However, this region is not a very ideal example of regional cooperation or integration as over the years regional initiatives for conflict resolution, creating common market or promotion of democracy have almost mainly failed. The post Arab Spring era created trivial prospects about whether the Middle East would witness the beginning of a new era of regional cooperation. Instead, rather than regional unity it observes that the further weakening of the Arab state system. Henceforth, a scarcity of regional cooperation as well as integration in the area has also led interested commentators and scholars to label the Middle East as 'the region without regionalism' or a space of weak regionalism.³

Inspite of this, region-building in the Middle East began to develop along with sub-regional lines, i.e. the Gulf, the Maghreb etc., as they emerged more convenient and feasible, implying that region-building subsequently became more narrowly focused. Like the Arab Middle East, the Persian Gulf sub-region is also considered as one of the least regionally integrated or institutionalised areas of the world.⁴ Contrary to the fact, formal institutional forms of regionalism in the Gulf region is embodied in the name of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf popularly known as the

¹ R. Fawn, (2009). 'Regions' and their study: wherefrom, what for and where to?. *Review of International Studies*, 35, pp. 5-34.

² M. Beeson, (2005). Rethinking Regionalism: Europe and the East Asia in Comparative Historical Perspective. *Journal of European Public Policy*, pp. 12:6, 969, DOI:10.1080/13501760500270620

³ A. Sever, (2018). *Globalism, Regionalism and the Middle East in Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries*, p. 1. Retrieved on 25 December 2021 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328792402_Globalism_Regionalism_and_the_Middle_East

⁴ A distinction may be made between regions and sub-regions, as the latter can roughly be understood as geographically distinct sub-areas of continents. These two terms are frequently used interchangeably though and the difference between them is often vague

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It's foundation followed a regionalist movement that swept across the world and peaked in the Arab world after the Second World War. However, it is still contested whether the formation of the GCC might be considered as an attempt at regionalism and a region building initiative on the part of the member states. Forty years have passed since its establishment and these issues still remain unsettled.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

A lot of research works have been done on the different aspects of the GCC and its way of journey as well as its success and failure in building peace and harmony among the member states. Those were all mainstream ideas which had almost same perception on the activities and organizational processes of the GCC as well as its relevance in this era of globalization and cultural amalgamation. The development of organizations like BENELUX, SAARC, CEATO, CENTO and APEC etc. is although based on different objectives but these are the organizations which primary goal is to develop regional integrity first. There are different regional organizations with several aims and goals among which the GCC is a very distinct one the primary aim of which is to build a developed and sustainable coordination and inter-connection among the member states in every aspects of them. The following are the basic objectives of this research paper which are absorbed based on the objectives that the GCC constitution beholds.

- To conceptualize the establishment and development processes of the GCC following the unrest that emerged in the 1980s.
- To identify the roles played by the GCC in the fields of politics, economy, culture and social aspects to its member states as well as to the global platforms.
- To make an analysis on the regionalism of the GCC through the application of relevant theoretical approaches.

The whole research paper is designed based on the above mentioned objectives. It is important to understand the regionalism of the GCC as well as its success and failure to bring peace in this part of world.

RESEARCH QUESTION

There are some questions those are attempted to be answered in this research endeavour. These research questions will work as the basement of this research. The principle Research Question (RQ) and the Sub Research Questions (SRQ1 to 4) are given below.

RQ: What kind of regionalism does the GCC highlight and what theoretical perspectives can we deploy to understand its regionalism?

SRQ1: In what circumstances the GCC was formed?

SRQ2: What role has the GCC played politically, economically and socially in the member states and in regional platforms?

SRQ3: What are the reasons for and sources of the GCC's success and failure?

SRQ4: Can the formation of the GCC be mentioned as a region building initiative in the Persian Gulf?

This study, therefore, endeavours to search for logical and justified arguments to fulfil above mentioned queries in different sections.

Regions, Regionalism and Regionalisation

Region, regionalization and regionalism are interrelated concepts, but their definitions remain contested; consequently, their relationship each other is ambiguous.⁵ The reason for this ambiguity is basically due to the contested pattern of their definitions. Hence, understanding of any sort of regionalism in the Gulf region requires some discussion of their meanings. Geographical proximity is considered as an important condition of a region. B. Chakma elucidates, a region is generally defined when a group of geographically proximate states come together for the purpose of cooperation on cultural similarities or similar historical experiences or any other subjectively defined notions.⁶ Geographical proximity is especially important in case of economic regionalism. Another set of IR pundits put emphasis on non-physical terms specially social and political forces rather than physical boundary. According to Amitav Acharya, 'regions are not a geographic given, but are socially constructed, made and remade through interactions.'⁷ While Peter J. Katzenstein also argues the same position.⁸ More precisely, scholars belonging to the Constructivist school of thought, in particular, dismiss geographic proximity as a crucial factor and define region in non-physical terms.⁹

A third group of scholars ventures to balance between two perceptions and states that members of a common region usually share cultural, linguistic, economic and political ties. In this connection Kym Anderson and Hege Norheim rightly observe that 'while there is no ideal definition [of a region], pragmatism would suggest basing the definition on the major continents and subdividing them somewhat according to a combination of cultural, language,

⁵ B. Chakma, (2020) *South Asian Regionalism: The Limits of Cooperation*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, p. 5.

⁶ B. Chakma, (2020) *South Asian Regionalism*, p. 6.

⁷ A. Acharya, (2012). *Comparative Regionalism: A Field Whose Time Has Come?*. *The International Spectator*, 47, p.1, Retrieved on 30 Dec, 2021 from doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2012.655004.

⁸ In the field of comparative politics, P.J. Katzenstein has been regarded as a path breaker in understanding of comparative political economy and comparative regional analysis equally in Europe and in recent times on a global scale. For details see, Katzenstein, P.J. (1997) *Introduction: Asian Regionalism in Comparative Perspective*, in Katzenstein, P.J. & Shiraishi, T. (Eds.) *Network Power: Japan and Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁹ B. Chakma, (2018). *SAARC and region-building: is South Asia a region?*. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 14 (2), pp. 189-205, DOI: 10.1080/19480881.2018.1478272

religious, and stage-of-development criteria.’¹⁰ T.V.Paul considers all these issues who describes region, ‘as a cluster of states that are proximate to each other and are interconnected in spatial, cultural and ideational terms in a significant and distinguishable manner.’¹¹ Hence, to form a region mutual interdependencies matter most such as political, social and economic interrelationships or cultural, historical and ethnic bonds. The importance of region is manifested in the way that it plays role in maintaining relations between the states of the region and the rest of the world. Experts mention different types of regions, such as economic regions, security regions, environmental regions and cultural regions.

Regionalism and regionalisation are intimately interrelated concepts as both are related to the creation of region-ness. While the later is more about the process, the former connotes the consequences of that process. These two concepts are interwoven and hard to differentiate, but regionalization and regionalism are perceived differently in terms of involving actors, their occurrence with top-down or bottom-up initiatives, and their attention to the outcome or procedure.¹² Regionalism is usually understood as a state-led or states-led project designed to reorganise a particular regional space along defined economic, institutional and political lines. On the other hand, regionalisation denotes more spontaneous and endogenous processes which involve undirected economic and social interactions between non-state actors whether individuals, firms, companies, NGOs, etc. In short, regionalism means the body of ideas and values that contribute to the creation, maintenance or modification of a particular region or type of world order. On the other hand, regionalisation or so called region-building refers to the process of region formation. There are numerous factors and motivations underlying the recent global trend of regionalism within a globalised world system. Security concerns, promoting peace and economy are powerful reasons behind regionalism. The effects of globalisation itself may also be seen as a factor prompting regionalism.

The six countries in the Gulf namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and the UAE those forming the GCC share some familiar features, grounds and enjoy some basic links. The GCC countries are located in a single geographical area and share common borders that facilitate travel and promote trade. The strategic location and possession of most of the world oil reserves lead the GCC states to realise the common dangers confronting them. Furthermore, the linguistic, historical and religious ties create a homogeneous unit, promoting mutual understanding on the regional levels. In addition, these countries share similar political systems and interests and face similar

¹⁰ K. Anderson, & H. Norheim, (1993). History, Geography, and Regional Economic Integration, in Anderson, K. & Blackhurst, R. (eds.) Regional Integration and the Global Trading System. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf. p. 26.

¹¹ T.V. Paul, (ed.) (2012). International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 4.

¹² A. Sever. Globalism, Regionalism and the Middle East, p. 4.

development issues. All these matters prompt these states to pursue a policy of close cooperation and unity.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

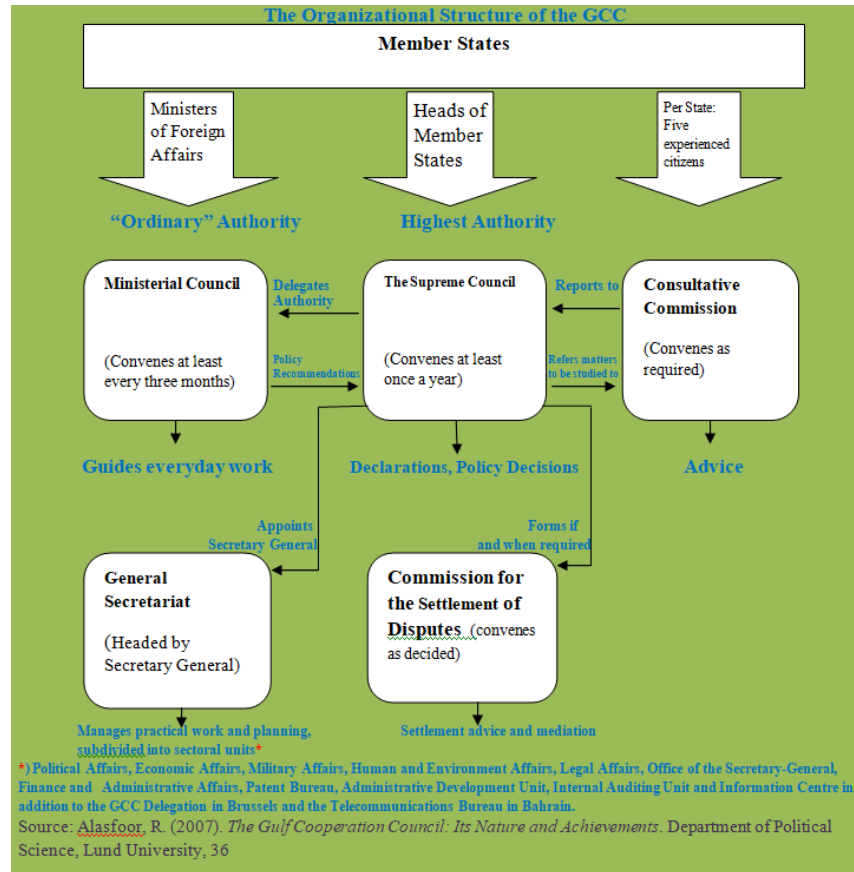
The rise of sub-regionalisms in the Middle East and the Gulf after WWII brought about a new dimension to reassess state-led regionalism at a different level. Hence the foundation of GCC was not born out of a vacuum rather result of a long standing effort. In May 1976, Kuwaiti Crown Prince Shaikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah urged for the establishment of a Gulf Union. Even before, the period of the 1970s had witnessed the formation of the Gulf Organization for Industrial Consultancy, the Gulf News Agency, Gulf Ports Union, regional airline called Gulf Air and the Gulf Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. At last, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf decided to institutionalise their cooperation in a more constructive way. On 4th February 1981 the foreign ministers of the Persian Gulf Arab States have signed a declaration about the establishment of that regional organisation. On May 25, 1981 the rulers of the United Arab Emirates, State of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, State of Qatar and State of Kuwait, during the summit in Abu Dhabi, accepted the *Charter of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf* and the organisation GCC (The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf) came in to existence.

According to its charter, the GCC ventures ‘To effect coordination, integration and inter-connection between Member States in all fields in order to achieve unity between them’.¹³ Article 4 of GCC Charter tells all about the main aim of the establishment of GCC and this is supposed to be the most important article of the Charter. Moreover, Article 4 entails that the GCC is such an organization that has been established to strengthen bilateral relations among its member states so that they can promote cooperation among the citizens of the member states. The GCC area currently covers about 2, 672, 7500 sq. km which is a huge area from the middle-eastern part of the world. The official language of GCC is off course Arabic as the member states’ mother languages are Arabic too. The GCC is structured based on three important divisions for a better performance of the organization and each of the divisions has significant tasks to be accomplished for making the workings smooth and valuable to the member states. **Figure: 1** illustrates the organisational structure of the GCC. The three main structures of GCC are the Supreme Council, the Ministerial Council and the General Secretariat. The main decision making body is the Supreme Council which is comprised of head of six member states with rotate presidency that meets at least once a year. There is a 30 member (5 from every state) Consultative Commission of the Supreme Council and also a Dispute settlement Commission that is called for each disagreement. The GCC Ministerial Council is consist of the foreign ministers of member states and normally meets quarterly. Each member also has the option to call an extraordinary session of either council, so long as another GCC member

¹³ For details see, GCC Charter, available at <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/Pages/Primarylaw.aspx>

seconds the call. Each member state holds a single vote within these meetings. There is a strong preference for consensus but decisions are taken by majority rule when necessary.

Figure: 1



There is also a GCC secretariat with Secretary-General office. These are very crucial parts of the organization where each part has significant tasks to do. The current Secretary General is Nayef Falah Mubarak Al Hajraf, previously served as Kuwait’s 19th minister of finance. He is supported by ten assistant secretary-generals with functional portfolios, ranging from economic to cultural affairs. The Secretariat is located in the city of Riyadh and this is supposed to be most active and unique department of the GCC. The GCC has a particular constitution which primarily aims at reflecting the importance of the organization to its member states in order to solve bilateral and multilateral problems as well as building harmony among them.

The GCC aims at achieving regional unity by making its member states able to develop common objectives in their political and cultural identities where their identity as Muslim will be promoted in that part of the world and also to the other parts. There is a significant constituent of the GCC for making its member states bound to follow the rules and regulation so that its ultimate goals can be achieved. The process of Presidency of the organization rotates annually where the decision is taken by the Supreme Council of the GCC.

Considering economic pattern, cultural and religious commonalities, the GCC countries have primarily the potential for being regarded as a region more precisely sub-region. According to Louise Fawcett, higher levels of cohesion, commonality and cooperation might prevail in a smaller, tightly defined geographical area, or what is often termed a sub-region.¹⁴ In addition of geographical proximity, the GCC member's common historical experience and Arab-Muslim identity represents a relatively high degree of homogeneity those make the case more strong. However, T.V.Paul assumes, 'there are at least three core liberal ideas or mechanisms for regional peace and order.'¹⁵ These three ideas are: democracy, economic interdependence and institutions. The GCC countries are far behind from these three core elements. Moreover, the lack of advancement in the regionalist project entails that the GCC members have struggled to harmonise their competing visions and discourses about the region. So, a closer analysis would reveal that defining the Gulf in the context of the GCC as a region, more precisely a sub-region is complex and not as simple as it may appear. This proposition becomes more evident if we discuss the GCC in terms of security and economic region. The below analysis presents extensive details of these competing discourses.

Security Region

Can the GCC be considered as a full-fledged security community? This question is worthy of discussion. Regional security is one of the most discussed topics in international relations. The term 'Regional Security' is perceived as an arrangement of protection based on mutual understandings between countries in a specific region against all sort of risks of crises, instability, armed conflicts and regional wars. In most cases, security at the regional level is developed under as an alliance or a system functioning within the defined region. On the other, it is difficult to discuss the issue of regional security without giving proper concentration to its institutions. Regional institution is defined among others as a formal structured organization capable of deliberate action, as well as the international regime made of principles formulated through negotiations and expressly approved by states.¹⁶ These institutions are supposed to support development of peaceful relations among their members and thenceforth develop the feelings of security and community or respond to threats and conflicts.

Experts on contemporary security studies identify some points as threats to regional security. They attach particular importance to the elements of threats such as the possibility of the outbreak of a war, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and means of their delivery, international terrorism, organized crime, uncontrolled migration, social tensions, environment disasters, corruption, epidemics or demographic threats associated with low

¹⁴ L. Fawcett, (2004). Exploring regional domains: a comparative history of regionalism. *International Affairs*, 80 (3), pp. 429-446.

¹⁵ T.V. Paul, *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation*, p. 12.

¹⁶ R. Keohane, (1988) *International Institutions: Two Approaches*. *International Studies Quarterly*, 32 (4), pp. 379-396

population growth and aging of populations in the states of a given region.¹⁷ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver are known as two influential proponents of regional security complex theory belonging to the Copenhagen School of thought. Regional security institutions are important in the sense that the UN cannot solely maintain global security due to the lack of adequate resources. This gap can be filled by such organisations.

The emergence of the GCC is seen as a counter balance against the instability among the dominant military powers in the region. Under some geo-political and geo-strategic context the GCC was founded. The reasons from regional geo-political aspects can be summarised to at least four events: the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and Iran's attempts for expansionist ideology; the subsequent outbreak of war between the two most powerful regimes, Iran and Iraq; Iran's occupation of UAE's islands; and finally, the increased consciousness for self-importance and foreign policy autonomy due to the hydrocarbon bonanza. The unrest that arose following the lightning in Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem was also a very significant cause behind the development of the GCC so that this alliance can dominate Israel and can promote peace and harmony in the region. For Gulf policymakers these events were seen as an initiative to form an alternative platform to the Arab League thanks to their increased financial capacities to consider the issues related with the Gulf.

Presently, the security of Persian Gulf relates with few more regional developments like unrest in Afghanistan, volatile Israeli-Palestinian relations, unsystematic regime changes in Libya and Egypt, continuous civil war in Syria, rise of terrorism and impact of so called Arab Spring in the region. Rather than institutionally embodying specific social, cultural or religious norms, Gulf regionalism has mostly been driven by perceptions of insecurity, with institutional integration within the Arab Gulf considered better protection than offered by the main existing Arab regional organisation, the Arab League.¹⁸

Interestingly, in the original charter no mention was made regarding security or peripheral defence. Even, the objectives of the organisation as outlined in Article 4 did not mention a clear mandate for security cooperation nor the existing security condition was pointed as a concern of the time, though this was exactly the scenario. Hence forth, if security began as an understood but unspoken part of the GCC's raison d'être, it did not take long for security to become a central part of the organization's efforts.

The GCC states have made every effort to put forward military arrangements and security to promote the idea of regional self-defence. As a result, in

¹⁷ A.Kusztal (2017) Theoretical foundations of regional security in international relations - the overview. *Journal of Science of the Military Academy of Land Forces*, 49 (1), pp. 17-30.

¹⁸ R.H. Santini, (2017). A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited. *The International Spectator*, 52 (4), pp. 93-111.

November 1984 member states agreed to form the Peninsula Shield Force for rapid deployment against external aggression. Moreover, in December 2000 the GCC states concluded the GCC Joint Defense Agreement and on 11 December 2013, the GCC states further declared the formation of a joint military command. However, these initiatives have scarcely progressed beyond limited cooperation and consultation. For the last few years, the GCC has been largely defined by its responses to the various security threats it has faced: from the 2003 Iraq War; Arab Spring, the popular uprisings that shook the Arab World including Bahrain in 2011¹⁹; to the recent military campaigns against ISIL in Syria and Iraq; post Arab Spring crisis in Yemen.²⁰

Moreover, suspicions about Iran's regional goal, hegemonic attitude to become a regional player and its influence over the Shia population throughout the region is ever increasing than before. Ambitious Iran is trying to expand its revolutionary policy across the region through the proxies such as Hezbollah of Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and Shia population in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and in eastern Saudi Arabia mainly in Qatif and al-Ahsa. The following **Table: 1** presents the number and percentage of Shia population in the countries of the GCC.

Table: 1

Country	Capital	Population	Percentage of Shia Population
Bahrain	Manama	1,701,575	70
Kuwait	Kuwait City	4,270,571	36
Oman	Muscat	5,106,626	4
Qatar	Doha	2,795,484	8
Saudi Arabia	Riyadh	34,813,871	15
UAE	Abu Dhabi	9,890,402	13

Source: Devised by the author based on information from www.worldometers.info and <http://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org>

From theoretical perspective, rather than popular IR theories of Liberalism and Constructivism, realism can better explain the primary motivation behind the establishment of the GCC. Some arguments in favour of constructivism may be regarded in consideration of common Arab culture or language. However, realism is pre-dominant. From the point of view of Neorealism, sub-regional integration occurs in response of weak states concern against security threats

¹⁹ The GCC assisted the Bahraini government in suppressing anti-government uprising in the country resulting out of Arab Spring. The Peninsula Shield Force that had remained largely dormant since its creation was called upon in March 2011 by the Bahraini leadership to help and manage domestic unrest. This event marking the first time military intervention of the GCC in a member country where the organisation used such a collective military option for suppressing a revolt.

²⁰ During the Yemen crisis in 2011, the GCC Secretariat heavily intervened in the volatile political issues of Yemen and helped to broker a deal that would result in the expel of long-term president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Political experts mention this event as unprecedented leap into foreign policy by an organization that has normally confined itself to regional affairs.

posed by potential hegemonic powers and the presence of a core authority within the organisation is usually emphasized. Neorealists can properly explain the case of the GCC in emphasising the importance of the geopolitical standpoint, and in particular the presence of common security threats, namely dominant Iran and Iraq; side by side a strong power in the core, Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the GCC is a realist organisation in the sense that it is a tool in the hands of the leaders and the leaders of the member states are determined to protect their political structures. It is mentionable that the ruling families (constituting the leadership of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates [UAE] plus the other five GCC states) enjoy relatively strong legitimacy because they are an integral element of the 'traditional' political environment and continue to rule the respective state for a long period of time. The GCC rulers were determined to maintain *status quo* and offset any issues arising out of Arab Spring. Gulf rulers were quick to 'securitise' unrest in Bahrain and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), especially against restive populations in Eastern Saudi Arabia, responding swiftly and unapologetically in an unprecedented flexing of muscles, most notably through the Peninsula Shield Force.²¹

The following **Table: 2** presents the ruling families in the GCC states and their tribal affiliation with more details.

Table: 2

State	Ruling Family	Tribal Affiliation	Beginning of Rule
Bahrain	Al-Khalifah	Anazah	1783
Saudi Arabia	Al-Saud	Anazah	1792
Kuwait	Al-Sabah	Anazah	1754
Qatar	Al-Thani	Bani Tamim	1878
Oman	Al-Bu Said	Al Bu Said	1744
UAE	Al-Nahyan	Bani Yas (Abu Dhabi)	1855

Source: Devised by the author based on *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: A Different Perspective*, Khaloun Hassan Al-Naqeeb, Routledge, 1990

A neorealist standpoint can be considered at this stage which argues that the key stimulus for Gulf States international action is their survival issue. This attitude becomes more apparent from the fact that the GCC has closed its membership for long. However, at the time of Arab Spring, the GCC decided to extend its membership. The GCC extended invitation to the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies to join the organisation in 2011. As Jordan and Morocco are the only two Arabic speaking monarchies not currently in the council, the current members see them as strong potential allies and sometimes bonding among them is referred as GCC+2 (GCC+ Jordan and Morocco). So in case of

²¹ L. Sadiki, & L. Saleh, (2020). The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of 'Normlessness' in Gulf Regionalism. *The International Spectator*, 55 (2), 1-16, Retrieved on 30 Dec, 2021 from DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2020.1747287.

the GCC, neorealist approach can be applied where the states act internationally for sustaining their peaceful existence.

As a regional institution, the GCC has achieved some important successes on the political and diplomatic grounds. The GCC has played vital role in resolving several political disputes including putting an end to the Iran-Iraq war, helping the government and people of Kuwait during Iraqi occupation, contributing to end of long standing tensions between Oman and South Yemen, helping Bahrain to tackle its internal uprising, brokering successful power transition in Yemen and solving peacefully the Lebanon civil war. In international forum, the big powers usually listen carefully the views of the GCC states on a range of issues: the wars in Afghanistan, the Palestine issue and on other international issues concerning with the Muslim and Arab worlds.

The GCC had been dubbed a ‘classic security alliance.’²² In this connection G. Cawthra observed, “the GCC states have entered into a mutual defence pact, established a small multinational regional defence unit, carried out joint military exercises, and worked towards setting up a common air defence mechanism.”²³ Yet so far, the GCC has been unable to set itself up as a full-fledged regional security organisation. The GCC had long been described as falling short of a “security community.”²⁴ Numerous reasons can be traced back behind this failure. The most important drawback is absence of a supranational authority which can hold authoritative control over member states on any issue. Another important factor is the external specially the US intervention. Moreover, the concept of sovereignty has become contested when globalization and regionalization intensified. The leaders of the GCC states still showing their unwillingness to compromise their absolute sovereign power that makes the regionness more difficult.

In first glimpse, the GCC members possess few factors that can promote a functioning and capable security organisation. Even though, it seems they have been unable to confront many of the security challenges that have come their way. They had to rely time after time on exterior sources of security, in most cases. Henceforth, the GCC has struggled to become the Gulf’s main venue for defence policymaking as the US security umbrella has been extended to Gulf countries on a bilateral basis rather than under the aegis of regionalism.²⁵ Border issues and internal rivalries among other things continue to hinder the successful integration of the GCC states. One such border issue is dispute between Qatar and Bahrain over the Hawar Islands which is addressed by the International Court of Justice rather than by the GCC. Moreover, lack of trust, fear of Saudi dominance and suspicion among

²² M. Barnett, & G. Gause, (1998) *Caravans in Opposite Directions: Society, State and the Development of a Community in the Gulf Cooperation Council*, in Adler, E. and Barnett, M. (eds) *Security Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 161.

²³ G. Cawthra, A.D. Pisani, & A.H. Omari (eds.), (2007). *Security and Democracy in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, p. 34.

²⁴ L. Sadiki, & L. Saleh, (2020). *The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of ‘Normlessness’*.

²⁵ R.H. Santini, *A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa*.

members still exist which epitomizes the relationship among the GCC states. Saudi Arabia's size, economic strength, resources and military power make it the most influential one. Besides, the country is centrally located in the region with land border with most of the GCC states. Such structural power may hamper the regional integration. Tomas Thornton observes that in regional organizations it is hard for 'countries to establish balanced relations when one has a significant advantage in power over the other states.'²⁶ So, it can be said that security both binds and divides the GCC.

Economic Region

The GCC is not only destined to foster cooperation among the member states in terms of security from any kind of unrest and national or international political crisis. The GCC charter also involves cooperation among the member states in the economic aspects. The economic coordination among the GCC member states primarily involves the building of an economic block through the implementation of agreed integrative agreements. In turn, the GCC has become a remarkable international economic block.

The GCC has developed economic cooperation in four stages phase by phase: set up a Free Trade Area (FTA) in 1983 to a Customs Union in 2003 and a Common Market in 2008; plans for a Monetary union are discussed but stalled for general concurrence. Before hand in 1981, *The Joint Economic Agreement* was concluded that paved the way for the stringent economic integration. This Agreement contained the main provisions of the GCC Free Trade Area. To cope up with global economic trend, this agreement was revised for few occasions, importantly in 1998 (*Unified Economic Agreement*), 2001, 2004 (*The Economic Agreement Between the GCC States*) and in 2009 (*The GCC Monetary Union Agreement*). Many supporting institutions are formed to encourage a more interconnected system. An Independent Arbitration Centre was created in 1993 along with an Accounting and Auditing Commission in 1998. A standardization organisation was set up in 2002 and several common laws have been proposed and ratified such as the Common Trademark Law in 2012. The GCC created these institutions and enacted these reforms with the objective of eliminating non-tariff barriers existing among member countries. In order to foster both economic growth and diversity, the GCC also founded the Gulf Investment Corporation (GIC) in 1982. The Gulf Organisation for Industrial Consulting (GOIC) is another initiative that evaluates proposals for and promotes joint industrial projects between GCC members. Since the establishment it has identified over 400 new industrial opportunities and has published hundreds of industrial reports and feasibility studies. Some of the GOIC's most recent studies include overviews of the ammonia and urea industries in the region, pharmaceuticals and the feasibility of an automotive industry. Another major multibillion dollar initiative currently underway is the railway project that aims to link the GCC countries. The project is scheduled

²⁶ T.P. Thornton, (1991). *Regional Organizations in Conflict Management*. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 518 (1), pp. 132-142.

to be completed by 2023, covering more than 2,100 kilometers that link domestic to regional tracks.

The economy of GCC countries is mainly hydrocarbon (Oil and Gas) oriented and most of the revenues are extracted from its export. As of December 2018, the GCC countries had combined proven reserves of 497 billion barrels of crude oil representing approximately 34% of the world's estimated proven crude reserves and hold some 42 trillion cubic meters (tcm) of gas accounting for 22 percent of the total reserves discovered globally. In 2019, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) hold almost a third of proven global crude oil reserves and about a fifth of the world gas reserves.²⁷ World's supply of energy and its stability much depend on the free flow energy supply from this region. That is why the region is so crucial in the world politics. The robust population growth, together with the region's affluence and its abundant natural resources, point to continued strong market demand, which in turn helps to make the GCC countries attractive prospects for foreign investors.²⁸

For the last few years the GCC states are trying to diversify its sectoral dependency. They are trying to explore their chances in other sectors in the globalised world. The GCC posits a large economy and it demonstrates considerable performances over the last few years in terms of economic growth. The GCC's GDP is increased by 490% from \$278 billion (USD) in 1983 to \$1.64 trillion (USD) in 2019. Increased output, investment and income have led to the swift modernisation of the GCC that not only made it a global competitor but also led to a dramatic increase in human development index too. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), human development increased from a GCC average of 0.671 (classified as medium development) in 1981 to 0.844 (classified as very high development) in 2019. Moreover, the GCC states can be sorted into two groups in consideration of macro-economic and military strength. Though less endowed with natural resources on a per capita basis, Saudi Arabia is a regional power-house due to its massive GDP and military strength. The UAE stands out second with its overall economic size and military strength. While Qatar's GDP ranks as the third largest among the GCC members. **Figure: 2** shows the GDP based on International Monetary Fund (IMF) and military strength which the Global Fire Power (GFP) measures used for the six GCC states.

²⁷ BP. (2019, June) BP statistical review of world energy, 68th ed., London: BP. Retrieved from <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf> [Google Scholar].

²⁸ J. Kinninmont, (2009). The GCC in 2020: The Gulf and Its People. The Economist, 1-22, https://www.academia.edu/534995/The_GCC_In_2020_The_Gulf_And_Its_People.

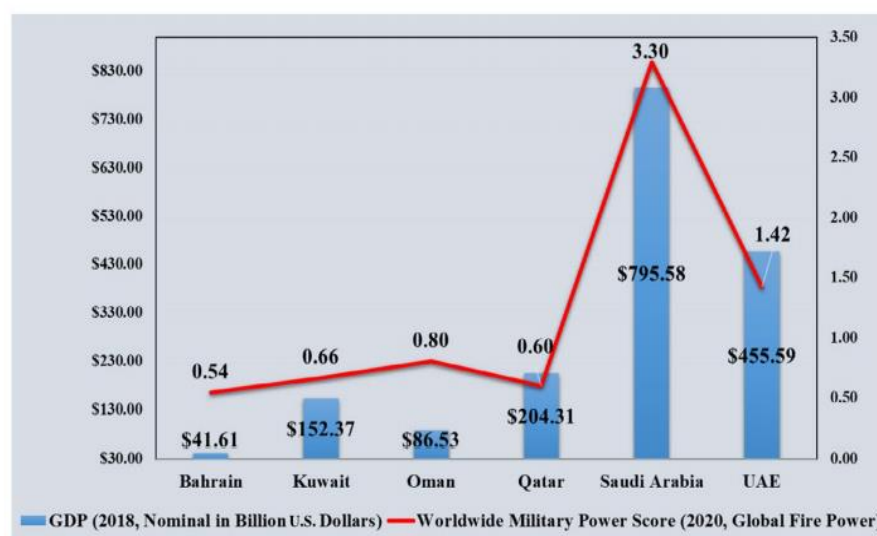


Figure: 2 The GDP and military strength in the GCC states (For the military scores, reverse values from GFP website (www.globalfirepower.com) are used. GFP normally assigns lower score for stronger military (USA given 0.0606 as the strongest army) and higher score for weaker military (Bhutan given 10.1681 as the weakest army). Source: World Bank Database, Global Fire Power Institute (globalfirepower.com))

Source: E. Tok, (2021) The Gulf Cooperation Council states: Crystallization of the regional cooperation and alliances amid dwindling resources. *Digest of Middle East Studies*. 30:53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12226>

Successful integration in the GCC has significantly deepened on the economic level in recent years. This in turn enhances the readiness among the GCC members to recognise meaningful commitments on other levels of cooperation. Nevertheless, the organisation faces many difficulties in establishment of a consistent economic area. It is suffering from low intra-regional trade. Over the last forty years, intra-regional trade only increased from about 5% in 1982 to 7% in 2002 and 10% in 2016.

In addition, the GCC trade arrangements have been unable to increase its trade because signatory states have so far been unable to substitute goods and services previously imported from outside the region. The GCC's economic and industrial composition is simply not diverse enough to be able to complement each other. In other words, the GCC countries tend to import the same goods. It is clear that diversification measures and initiatives are important towards achieving greater intra-regional trade. The difficulties are furthered by high heterogeneity of economic conditions among members and too much public sector attachment in the economy. Moreover, the GCC countries have been concerned about the sustainability of their hydrocarbon revenues for decades. Before the Covid 19 pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that, unless the GCC countries undertake substantial fiscal and economic reforms, they will deplete their conserved

wealth by 2034.²⁹ The pandemic has likely shortened this timeline. These dilemmas hamper the progress of effective economic integration despite linguistic, religious and cultural similarities that encourage trade.

Regionalism in the Middle East, Recent Developments and the GCC

Though some endeavours at regionalism in the Middle East have been initiated after the second world war, advancement has been inadequate in terms of political, economic and security cooperation. The foundation of the League of Arab States or Arab League (AL) in 1945 has been considered as the first attempt at regionalism in the Arab Middle East. It is regarded as the oldest attempts at regionalism and founded even before the UN. The GCC is founded in 1981 with comprising of six Persian Gulf states. The agreement to set up another regional institution the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) is signed in Marrakesh in February 1989 among Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania.

Another such attempt in the Middle East is Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA). Lastly, the Agadir Agreement signed in 2004 aimed at establishing a free trade area among Jordan, Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia. The activities of Arab League has largely remained on paper while the Arab Maghreb Union has proved to be unable to triumph over historical frictions. The GAFTA or Agadir are more recent initiatives and have made little progress, however have the potentiality to provide the institutional frameworks for starting renovated policies in light of the post Arab Spring juncture. Among these, compared to other regional organisations in the Middle East, The GCC is showed somewhat performance and has reached a level of success.

Post Arab Spring regional order posits the GCC states more opportunity to increase integration. The Gulf monarchies seemed to support likeminded governments and organisations and started to streamline their economic and military support across the region to prevent the wave. In consequence, before and after Arab Spring the GCC states enjoyed advantage with growing wealth and better military capacity rather than other states of the Middle East specially dwindling Beirut, Damascus, Sanaa, Cairo and Khartoum. Instead, internal differences among the GCC states were extensive. These divergences presented the GCC states in a position to thwart a unified stance and frustrated the more possible intimate regional integration. In the post Arab Spring scenario, the GCC states can be divided into three broad camps in terms of their regional policy: pro-democracy (allied with Turkey and Islamic movements) and Iran friendly (Qatar), counter-revolutionary and anti-Iranian

²⁹ T.N. Mirzoev, et al. (2020). The Future of Oil and Fiscal Sustainability in the GCC Region. IMF Departmental Paper, no. 20/01, 1-55, Retrieved on 30 Dec, 2021 from <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Departmental-Papers-Policy-Papers/Issues/2020/01/31/The-Future-of-Oil-and-Fiscal-Sustainability-in-the-GCC-Region-48934>.

(Bahrain, KSA, and UAE), and staunchly neutral (Kuwait and Oman).³⁰ The following Table: 3 elucidates this scenario more properly.

Table: 3 The GCC states economic and political snapshot

Country	Citizens' economic well-being	Regional policy orientation	Economic power (GDP)	Military power
Oman	Weak	Neutral (Warmer to Iran)	Weak	Weak
Bahrain	Weak	Allied to Saudi Arabia	Weak	Weak
Saudi Arabia	Weak	Anti-Iran and Status-Quo Leaning (Anti-Revolutionary)	Strong	Strong
Kuwait	Strong	Neutral (Inclined to Saudi Arabia)	Medium	Weak
Qatar	Strong	Pro-Iran and Democracy Leaning (Islamist Movements)	Medium	Weak
UAE	Strong	Allied to Saudi Arabia	Strong	Strong

Source: Tok, E. (2021) The Gulf Cooperation Council states: Crystallization of the regional cooperation and alliances amid dwindling resources. *Digest of Middle East Studies*. 30:53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12226>

The post Arab Spring era is also witnessed widen of the split between Qatar and the GCC specially the KSA, Bahrain and the UAE. The crisis started in 2014. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar and later in 2017 the crisis became acute. On 5 June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt known as ‘anti-Qatar Quartet’ cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar and banned Qatar-registered planes and ships from utilising their airspace and sea routes. On 5 January 2021 Qatar and Saudi Arabia agreed to resolve the crisis brokered by Kuwait and the United States signed by Al-Ula Declaration.³¹ The post Arab Spring scenario still posits the GCC in many puzzles to be answered. Moreover, the fall of Kabul in the hands of Taliban on 15 August 2021 and their return to power will fuel the threat for increase of terrorism in the region. At the current historical juncture, the six Gulf states seem to be mired in mismatches between one state’s perception of the others’

³⁰ E. Tok, (2021). The Gulf Cooperation Council states: Crystallization of the regional cooperation and alliances amid dwindling resources. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 30, 53–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12226>

³¹ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain along with Egypt and rest of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreed and signed the “Al-Ula Declaration” at the 41st GCC Summit held in the city of Al-Ula on 5 January 2021. This marks the end of a three-year dispute which began on 5 June 2017. It is observed that this signing paves the way for the re-establishment of political and economic ties with Qatar and reinforces the commitment of the GCC member states to the political and economic stability of the region.

attitudes and actions, and tendencies towards non-compliance with putative (local and international) norms governing collective political behaviour (Sadiki & Saleh, 2020).³²

CONCLUSION

The study of this research has propositions for the regional definition debate and this is where this article steps in. As mentioned in the abstract of the paper, experts perceived three concepts regarding the definition of region: a) an imperative element where geographical proximity is highlighted; b) a non-physical entity where regions are made or unmade by interactions; and c) a third one ventures to combine the both perceptions. In case of the GCC, the first stand point seems problematic with the invitation of Morocco to become a member. Any inclusion of country like Morocco will make geographical limit of the region changeable. The second conceptual proposition of non-physical definition for regional formation is somewhat accepted in the light of the analysis so far. Within the framework of the GCC, Gulf countries concluded various interesting cooperation initiatives.³³ Various economic and security measures have increased continuous interactions among the GCC states. However, the paper also portrays the fact that the GCC is still struggling to develop a common region notwithstanding its existence for over forty years. The third one seems also somewhat confusing due to the GCC's peculiar realities of region-building experiences. The inclusion of new member like Morocco in the GCC will no doubt witness a geographically expanded region that would add new complexities in the organisation.

This article extends space to consider the discussion, whether the GCC can be mentioned as sub-region. Experts normally give emphasis on the following issues considering a sub-region:

- a. normally in a sub-region, the territories are linked or adjoining by seas and water bodies;
- b. the constituting states are generally geographically proximate;
- c. rigorous and regular relations exist between the states; and
- d. national and international actors identify the system as a distinctive area.

The GCC members resemble almost all the points mentioned above to reveal it as a sub-region. The actors are geographically proximate and the organization is based on the Persian Gulf. Politically, the participating states maintain regular communication with each other and economically, they all are petroleum-based countries often require to work intensively together. In international forum the EU, the USA and other international actors consider

³² L. Sadiki, & L. Saleh, (2020). The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of 'Normlessness'.

³³ M. Pinfari, (2016). Regional Organizations in the Middle East, Oxford Handbooks Online. Oxford: Oxford University Press, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.013.86. p 5.

the GCC as an important player of the region. The expression ‘GCC states’ is by now a mainstay of reports and analysis of Middle East politics.³⁴

Moreover, this paper has explored the complexities of region building initiative in the Persian Gulf region and nature of regionalism that the GCC experience stands for. As analysed, the GCC can be an example of ‘developmental regionalism’ as the prime rationale for the establishment of the GCC is the socio-economic development of the region (although the policies of the member states towards the GCC are guided by politico-security considerations rather than expected economic gains, as discussed). While its foundation character was ‘new regionalism’, the GCC in many considerations struggled to integrate market and society in the regionalisation process, which undermine the regionalist project. The GCC’s modes of operation is ‘top-down’ where the governments of the member countries maintain control over the regionalisation process instead of ‘bottom-up’ process as new regionalism would advocate. There is a prevalent shared *Khaliji* identity among the citizens of the GCC members. Even though, this bottom-up ‘we-ness’ seems not enough to supersede the top-down influence. From this point of view, inter-governmentalism explains the GCC regionalism better than any other conceptual framework.

The discussion so far presents the GCC as an atypical international organisation for its ambition to integrate its members in both the security and economic realms. This has led to a fair degree of confusion among analysts who have tried to apply analytical tools drawn from either Security Studies or International Political Economy.³⁵ The result has been that while some scholars have emphasized the lofty but unfulfilled promises made by GCC leaders in the security sphere (Fawcett, 1995: 16), others have tried to derive some satisfaction from the slightly more encouraging results achieved in the sphere of economic coordination and integration.³⁶ This paper from theoretical perspective prefers a neorealist standpoint to argue the grounds for the establishment of the GCC. Neo-realists are in better position to defend that the key stimulus for Gulf States international action is their survival issue. The threat perception from Iran still persists and to some extent even deepens. Moreover, the GCC is a realist organisation in the sense that it is a tool in the hands of the leaders of the member states. Nevertheless, over the years the organisation shows better performance in the realm of economic sectors. The geo-economy of the GCC has gained momentum as much as geo-politics.

The analysis of this paper has furthered the implications for the debate about the formation of the GCC is an attempt at regionalism in the Gulf. It is the finding of the paper that the GCC with many divergences is the expression of

³⁴ M. Legrenzi, (2011). *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East*. London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, p. 55.

³⁵ M. Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, p. 41.

³⁶ E.R. Peterson, (1988) *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Search for Unity in a Dynamic Region*. The University of Michigan: Westview Press. p. 174.

a low level of regionalism in sub-regional lines. As Ayşegül Sever, in this context observes, ‘the GCC is regarded as the most successful example of regionalism in the Middle East especially in the context of other examples of sub-regionalism in the region; (Sever, 2018: 7).³⁷ The GCC continues to be an integral part in promoting regional cooperation in the ever-changing geopolitical landscape of the Gulf region, despite the internal strife and deviation of some proposed plans and initiatives. In this connection it can be said that the performance of the Gulf Cooperation Council might well have surprised even the observer optimistic at its birth. If nothing else, recent Al-Ula Declaration signed on 5 January 2021 shows that member states remain as committed to the GCC today as they were during its foundation and its needs are no less pressing. The fundamental *raison d'être* of GCC for which it was built still remains compelling and valid. Regionalism is a global trend and regional protectionism in international trade is a phenomenon that is undeniable.³⁸ As a result, any decision to go against this trend means that the GCC states would lose out in terms of global deals. Having this Council will facilitate the Persian Gulf Arab states to increase their international economic interests in a more vibrant and collective manner as other regional and sub-regional organisations do normally. No doubt, the GCC is an example of somewhat successful attempts at sub-regionalism and in one hand, it seems that any ambitions that high levels of regionalisation would translate into an advanced regionalism have not been matched by the realities on the ground, yet and the low level of regionalism should not be taken as static, on the other. So, even with forty years under its belt, the GCC remains relatively young and if the last four decades are a testament to its potential to excel the traditional restrictions of growth and regionalism, then the next forty years look even more promising.

³⁷ A. Sever, (2018). Globalism, Regionalism and the Middle East, p. 7.

³⁸ B. Chakma, SAARC and region-building: is South Asia a region?, p. 178.