



GULF COUNTRIES: THE STRUGGLE FOR A COMMON IDENTITY IN A DIVIDED GCC

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The concept of *khaleeji* identity, also referred to sometimes as Gulf identity or identity of the Eastern Arabia, is characterized by its fluidity and is by no means a univocally recognized one. While grounded on cultural, social, historical and political homogeneity of the countries of the Arabian Gulf (namely Bahrain Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – UAE), it is a set of characteristics that can be equally well used to highlight similarities of these countries or, on the contrary, stress their particular differences depending on current circumstances. That is one of the reasons why this concept alone has not been widely used in literature as a framework for analyses. The khaleeji identity received primarily a boost with the creation of a political project, namely, the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. By projecting the concept of khaleeji identity into the scope of foreign affairs, members of the GCC strived to define this idea into a viable reality with the initiative moving forward and backward throughout the years¹; yet the recent split within the organization has made it clear that under the cover of similarities, there exist indeed sharp differences that can grow even deeper.

Arabian Gulf provides the backdrop and foundation for the khaleeji identity. The geographical location at the crossroads of intercontinental trade promoted since ancient times cultural exchange, gave birth to trading cities, but also exposed the region to foreign invasions. The harsh desert climate has always required adaptation to the natural environment and similar architectural solutions were found in the past to alleviate the scorching heat. The region is the birthplace of Islam and the religious practice has had an everlasting impact on its societies. Arabic and, specifically, its dialectical versions commonly known as khaleeji Arabic set the region linguistically aside. The availability of crops and animals but also the early trade with other regions has influenced the regional cuisine. In its more recent history, the discovery of oil and in some countries, also natural gas, has brought sudden riches boosting the economic growth, while creating an economic model of rentierism² and a predilection for comfort and luxury among the inhabitants. It has also encouraged the flow of the foreign labor that changed the complex social fabric of the Gulf societies. The monarchical political



systems that were cemented on the eve of independence provide another element of similarity. The societies, for most part tribal, were subsequently engaged in the process of modern nation building that continues till this day. Apart from Bahrain and Oman that have experienced a history of a statehood in the past, other countries emerged as new states and the need of creating a unifying national identity arouse. Khaleeji identity predates the creation of national identities that split peoples apart. The social bonds are, nonetheless, strong in the Gulf as many extended families are spread across countries and cross-national intermarriages are common. The cultural homogeneity is visible in popular culture, poetry, music and sports. The region is also characterized by youthful societies that are avid social media users. The Arabian Gulf shares also similar future challenges that are related to the climate change and transition from oil dependence to a knowledge-based economy. Sharing these characteristics, khaleejis (the inhabitants of the Gulf), are set apart from other Arabs.

All in all, there exists a number of characteristics that form the base of the khaleeji identity. Yet, similarly to the concept of European identity, they may not be sufficient to solidify a far-reaching regional identity. In addition, these characteristics should not underscore the differences that are not only visible between the countries but run deep within them. The tiny society of Bahrain alone comprises a number of social groups such as tribal Sunnis (Al Khalifa); rural Arab Shias (Baharna); urban Sunnis of Persian origin (Hawala); urban Sunnis of nontribal Arab origin (Najdi); urban Shias of Arab origin; and Shia Iranian migrants (Ajam).³ In addition, there are many variances of the dialects of Arabic spoken across this archipelago. Consequently, there exist identities other than national or khaleeji shared by people living across GCC countries that may become more salient in specific circumstances; similarly, national identities may become contested. Such differences are visible in other countries of the Arabian Gulf where local cleavages cut through the social fabrics.

It is the regional integration under the umbrella of GCC that was created in 1981 to counter the threat of Iran, which prompted the khaleeji identity into a citizenship, economic and political project providing it with

a much-needed direction and dimension. The idea of integration that initially emerged because of security concerns, intends cooperation in various areas of interest (such as economy, movement of goods and people, education, tourism and health). Among its most palpable achievements was the introduction of full GCC citizenship in the 21st century. Nonetheless, cooperation within the council remains driven by national interests, and current needs, as well as by the attitude each state has individually adopted towards a particular matter. Member-states have not fundamentally compromised their sovereignty⁴ and are considered equal, which is reflected in the principle of unanimity. Moreover, GCC decision-making processes do not have mechanism for consensus building, which can easily cause obstruction as well as lack of enforcement leading to very slow implementation of its decisions.⁵ GCC economic, military and political integration has been a slow process marked by numerous hesitations, difficulties and delays. The Gulf Monetary Union is such an example: announced in 1999, it has not materialized till this day.

The political will of each government of the member states shapes thus the outcomes of the cooperation depending on the circumstances. While the Arab Spring encouraged unity and the joint GCC military intervention in the Kingdom of Bahrain is a notable example of a military undertaking by the Peninsula Shield Force, the subsequent announcements by Saudi Arabia of GCC turning into a union in the aftermath of the uprising did not materialize. On the contrary, GCC states, with the exception of Bahrain, are even more conscious about preserving their sovereignty fearing domination of Saudi Arabia in the alliance. The recent spat with Qatar related to foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has had even deeper ramification with three member-states, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE cutting all ties with Qatar; and two remaining members, Oman and Kuwait continuing cooperation as usual. Gulf citizenship has thus been weakened with Qataris no longer being allowed to travel to and remain in the three countries in question. The perception of a common Gulf identity is determined thus by an understanding of individual benefit by each of the member-states rather than by the need for unity. Given these profound disagreements, countries involved may stress their unique charac-



teristics, aiming to set themselves apart from the rivals. The dispute over foreign affairs has led the societies of countries affected to highlighting their differences with Qataris and vice-versa. Anecdotal evidence reports even changes to the collars of thobes (a traditional garment worn by men), to make a difference between the Qatari and Emirati styles. Yet, no one disputes their khaleeji identity.

Khaleeji identity is a concept constantly in flux. Literally meaning “of the Gulf”, its evolution over the time is the outcome of the understanding of the shared concept by the members of Gulf societies, the processes of defining their national identities by the Gulf states’ leadership, and the outcomes of the relations within the GCC.

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