

Bridging the Gulf: Big answers through small Middle Eastern states

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Abstract: The small states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) – have much to offer in terms of asking and answering big questions. In particular, the GCC monarchies show how small states may manoeuvre amid multipolarity, why democratisation can struggle to take hold in small states, and how leader transitions shift or sustain small states’ foreign policies. In the Middle East and globally, the GCC small states play big diplomatic, economic, and security roles that merit thorough theorisation and astute analysis.

Keywords: democratisation, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), leader transitions, multipolarity, small states

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Introduction: The central task

A central task of political science is asking and answering big questions. Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) address small states’ democratisation and decentralisation in a comparative way. In terms of international politics, small states provide insights at all three levels of analysis (Singer, 1960). Internationally, their statecraft shows the autonomy that they may wield amid multipolarity. Internally, their societies reveal the challenges to democratisation. Individually, their statespeople direct policy changes and continuities.

These dynamics are present throughout the Middle East. The small states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE) - have much to offer in terms of asking and answering big questions. In particular, the GCC monarchies show how small states may manoeuvre amid multipolarity, why democratisation can struggle to take hold in small states, and how leader transitions shift or sustain small states’ foreign policies. In the Middle East and globally, the GCC small states play big diplomatic, economic, and security roles that merit thorough theorisation and astute analysis.

Three big questions

Three big questions in the region stand out: how do small states navigate systemic polarity shifts, why has democracy struggled to deepen, and how do leadership transitions shape policy? Middle East studies scholars analyse the area’s regional order (Lynch and Mabon, 2025), its regime types and social movements (Lynch, Schwedler, and Yom, 2022) and the diversity of leaders’ ideologies (Özdamar and Canbolat, 2023). Within the broad field of Middle East studies, the small monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represent insightful cases (Almezzaini and Rickli, 2017).

First, how have the small GCC states navigated systemic polarity shifts? By the 2010s, a move from US-led unipolarity toward multi-polarity was clear (Mearsheimer, 2019). Soubrier (2020, p. 10) argues that a “multi-polarization of Gulf security” provides the GCC states with “leeway or added leverage in their strategic and international relations with their traditional partners.” Equipped with a level of autonomy that is possible in a multi-polar scenario, manoeuvrability best describes the policy positions and priorities of the small Gulf states.

Multipolarity is permitting Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE to diversify through unique alignment formation, policy independence, and arms procurement (Parker and Bakir, 2024). Dating to the 1990s, the GCC’s small states’ national security strategies remain reinforced by bilateral partnerships with the US (Szalai, 2022). However, they are augmenting their US relations with ties to both the latter’s friends and foes.

In terms of US friends, the small GCC states are deepening their bilateral ties with France and/or the United Kingdom (Roberts, 2023). Turkey has embodied a vital partner for Qatar, which endured a challenging blockade and boycott by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE from 2017 to 2021 (Miller and Al-Marri, 2022). Meanwhile, Bahrain and the UAE normalised their diplomatic relations with Israel via the US-brokered Abraham Accords in 2020 (Fakhro, 2024). Finally, the “I2U2” working group links Israel, India, the US, and the UAE across various sectors (Sullivan, 2023).

In terms of US foes, the UAE is forging deeper ties with China and Russia “to adapt to a multipolar, ‘post-American’ reality in the region” (Krasna, 2023). But as Emirati policy-maker Anwar Gargash has stated: “Our primary strategic security relationship remains unequivocally with the United States” (Gargash, 2022). We thus see the GCC small states navigating multipolarity by retaining their US security connections, whilst augmenting these eclectically.

Second, why has democracy struggled to deepen in the small GCC states? On the surface, this question is redundant, given that these states reflect autocratic regime types. But a deeper look reveals ambitions and precedents for democratisation which have variably declined. The Gulf’s smallest state, Bahrain, witnessed pro-democracy protests in 2011 amid the regional Arab Spring uprisings. But a combination of the Al Khalifa regime’s crackdown, a Saudi and Emirati intervention, and US inaction doomed the democratic movement (Zunes, 2013, p. 149).

Kuwait’s National Assembly had embodied the GCC’s most influential representative assembly. There, parliamentarians had been able to grill cabinet ministers and advocate for civic and political reform. But, from 2006 to March 2024, Kuwaiti emirs dissolved parliament a dozen times amid bouts of gridlock. Sean Yom’s (2024) premonition of the current emir’s full suspension of parliament occurred in May 2024, leading Brown (2024) to ponder “whether Kuwaiti democracy has been anesthetized, permanently circumscribed, or euthanized.”

Qatar’s advisory Shura Council differs from Kuwait’s parliament. In 2021, however, Qataris voted for 30 representatives to sit on the 45-seat council. Limited enfranchisement of some citizens produced controversy. This led to a November 2024 national referendum, in the context of which Baraa Shiban stated: “[H]aving dissatisfaction in a small country like Qatar is big” (Paton, 2024). By close of polls, 90% of Qatari voters backed a constitutional amendment to end Shura Council elections in favour of full emir appointment. The reasons included preservation of national unity and avoidance of tribal and familial contestation (VOA News, 2024). These three cases reveal how regime deterrence, executive decree, and public deference have led to a net decline in Gulf democracy.

Third, how do leadership transitions shape policy in the small GCC states? In Qatar, the shift from Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to his son, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, in June 2013 led to a change from an assertive foreign policy amid the Arab Spring uprisings to an introspective focus on domestic socioeconomics (Ulrichsen, 2014, pp. 173-184). But the hallmark of Qatari statecraft, its mediation in conflicts involving small Middle Eastern states such as Palestine and Lebanon, persists (Fromherz, 2024), demonstrating the particular contribution that small states can make to international security and peacebuilding.

Moreover, transition from Qaboos bin Said Al Said to Sultan Haitham bin Tariq in January 2020 did not find Oman deviating from its independent foreign policy (Parker, 2024). Finally, Kuwait stayed focused on domestic political-economic priorities after the succession from Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah to Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad in September 2020, and from Nawaf to Emir Sheikh Mishal Al Ahmad in December 2023 (Freer, 2023). Leaders variably pursue new policies and maintain existing ones; there is no one Gulf throughline.

Conclusion: a timely affirmation

Questions of polarity, democracy, and leadership are not isolated to the small Gulf states. In terms of navigating multipolarity, the Nordic and Baltic states have reinforced their security connections with the US and NATO after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Former Soviet republics like Azerbaijan and Georgia have witnessed the precarities of democratisation. And the variable effects of leadership transitions are clear in such places as El Salvador and Haiti.

As these cases illustrate, the theorising and analysis of Middle East and Gulf studies scholars provide important lessons as to the roles, responsibilities, and insights offered by small states amid great power competition, as they engage democracy, and amid their leadership changes, within the region and beyond. Thus, a decade later, Veenendaal and Corbett's affirmation that "small states matter" (2015, p. 528) rings as timely as ever.

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