

Máté Szalai (2022). *The foreign policy of smaller Gulf states: Size, power, and regime stability in the Middle East*. New York: Routledge. Hbk. 238pp. ISBN: 978-0-3677-4520-2. US\$128.

Recent years have seen a surge of scholarship on the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The five have wielded their ‘smallness’ in distinct, sometimes competing, ways. Some aim to transcend their smallness; others have embraced it. How can this variation inform small state scholarship?

Máté Szalai’s *The foreign policy of smaller Gulf states* is a timely and thorough book that contributes to the theorisation and evaluation of state smallness. Szalai uses a framework he terms the “complex model of size” (CMS) (p. 4) to assess the perceptual, absolute, relative, and normative forms of smallness. Furthermore, he analyses a wealth of demographic, economic, and discursive data to show how the components of CMS interact in and across the smaller GCC states. He then argues convincingly that these differences contribute to variations in their policies toward larger regional and international powers.

Chapter 1 distinguishes the four parts of CMS within a quadrant chart that accounts for the material, ideational, individual, and structural dimensions of state size (p. 8). The two most insightful parts of the model are at the internal level of analysis (expanded upon in chapter 4). First, there is “perceptual size,” which lies in the ideational-individual quadrant. Theoretically, it focuses on a state’s construction of its constitutive self-identity. Empirically, Szalai assesses intra-Gulf variation via discourse analysis of 1,175 United Nations Security Council speeches, revealing differences in how Gulf officials articulate their states’ sizes. Owing in part to their respective “unstable geographical position[s]” (p. 108) between larger neighbours, Kuwaiti and Emirati diplomats were the most likely to reference smallness. On the other hand, Qatari diplomats were least likely to refer to their state as small. For their part, Bahraini and Omani diplomats tended to focus on their respective country’s unique societal heterogeneities.

“Absolute size,” located in the material-individual quadrant, is the second-most insightful part of CMS. Theoretically, it draws from decades of literature to evaluate the worth of material capabilities for a smaller state’s tangible power. Empirically, Szalai evaluates the scarcity and/or profusion of territorial, demographic, economic, and military assets across the smaller GCC states. For instance, he reviews territorial size, climatic aridity, hydrocarbon resources, and labour market dynamics in an organized and accessible way. Szalai’s causal explanations for Gulf foreign policy variations rest mainly on these two internal sizes.

The two externally-oriented sizes receive less coverage (Chapter 3). Of these, “relative size” lies in CMS’ material-structural quadrant. Theoretically, it draws from rationalist theory to compare states’ measurable sizes. Empirically, World Bank data is used to show that only the UAE is “medium-sized,” seemingly being inverse to its own articulation of smallness at the UN. Relative smallness is debatable, though, given that some observers characterize Qatar as approaching middle power status. Oman defies easy size categorisation, whilst there is more consensus that Kuwait is a small state and Bahrain is the smallest in terms of most indicators.

“Normative size,” which lies in the ideational-structural quadrant, is the fourth and final part of CMS. Theoretically, it focuses on how others in international society form a subjective image of a given state’s size. Empirically, Szalai measures this with the GDELT Database, which aggregates media coverage of states’ cooperative and/or confrontational interactions. There is an insightful finding that Oman has the smallest normative size in the GCC due to its discreet diplomacy. However, since the GDELT data includes regional states with high media coverage due to both “internal and external” factors (p. 58), it could be paired with other sources to further analyse the normative “interstate interactions” (p. 56) of the small Gulf states.

The rest of the book excels in analysing foreign and security policy differences among the small GCC states. Chapter 5 focuses on the years 1968-2011. Szalai addresses the “relative” size aspect of CMS (pp. 147 and 160); the other three parts of CMS factor less prominently, as compared to the book’s first half. The smaller GCC states kept fairly uniform defensive policies in the 70s and 80s, sought alignments with the US in the 90s, and began to diverge after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Oman prioritised security and autonomy, whereby it kept defence ties with the GCC and Western states, while maintaining warm relations with Iran. Kuwait and Bahrain kept security and influence in terms of stronger alignments with the US and the GCC’s largest state: Saudi Arabia. Alternately, Qatar and the UAE sought influence and autonomy by pursuing more activist and out-of-area political and military engagement.

Chapter 6, covering 2011-21, assesses how the smaller GCC states addressed threats and opportunities with “compensatory policies” (p. 226). Bahrain compensated for absolute smallness amid Arab Spring protests by inviting GCC (especially Saudi) military assistance. Kuwait prioritised regional mediation to help solve intra-GCC rifts as it grappled with gridlock in its parliamentary politics. Oman leaned on its normative smallness to facilitate US-Iranian and Saudi-Houthi dialogue. Qatar and the UAE sought normative “enlargement” and competed via respective support (the Qataris) and opposition (the Emiratis) to regional Islamist networks (pp. 190-1). All these variations have led to unique stances on the institutional role of the GCC and normalisation – or not – with Israel. The key lesson of these differences is that states with similar positions in the international system do not necessarily pursue analogous statecraft.

There are two areas in which the book could be strengthened. First, Szalai tends to understate the generalisability of CMS by tying it too directly to the particularities of the Middle East and North African (MENA) state system (Chapter 2). However, smallness is an effective lens to assess the different policies of similar states in the same regional systems, like those of the Nordic countries Iceland, Denmark and Norway; or those of Singapore, Brunei and Timor-Leste in Southeast Asia. Some more engagement with the cross-regional utility of CMS would help the book appeal to a broader, small state studies audience.

Second, Szalai does lean rather heavily on an existing approach that lies outside CMS: “regime security” (p. 115). The final third of Chapter 4 focuses on the strengths and precarities of the Al Khalifa (Bahrain), Al Sabah (Kuwait), Al Said (Oman), Al Thani (Qatar) and Al Nahyan (Abu Dhabi in the UAE) ruling families. The section provides valuable empirics, but the inclusion of the regime security framework comes at the detriment of causal inference of the explanatory weight of CMS’s four “smallnesses.” In particular, it is unclear how absolute and perceptual size interact with regime (in)security to produce foreign policy differences.

Despite these caveats, overall *The foreign policy of smaller Gulf states* provides an effective, four-part typology of smallness and explains how size functions differently within and across the smaller Gulf states. Its comprehensive theoretical and empirical roadmap make it an excellent guide for anyone traversing the complexities of small state foreign policies in the Persian Gulf, and beyond.

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