



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

14th Gulf Research Meeting

Cambridge, 9-11 July 2024

Workshop No. 6

The Gulf Family: Transition, Tradition, and Tenacity

1. Directors

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2. Abstract

From the 1960s to the 1970s, Gulf Arab cities underwent a period of rapid urbanization and modernization, a phenomenon that impacted the fabric of societies. As suburbanization became a new way of life, families in the region increasingly had to deal with the transition from extended to nuclear families. Fast forward to the present, we are witnessing similar transformations as the Gulf states aim not only to make their workforce competitive but also to address the youth bulge with an eye on the next generation. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for instance, has made wholesale changes across various sectors ranging from education to labor policies, which in turn impact the private sphere — the family. Others such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar with smaller national populations have acted to attract the best foreign talent. Amid these changes, how will the Gulf family react in terms of tradition preservation, kinship ties, and its relationship with the non-national segment? What are the prospects for Gulf women? How does the Gulf family understand tolerance towards customs that are foreign to them?

3. Context

Families, and indeed, societies in the Gulf Arab states face a newfound period of transition as their political leadership — to varying degrees — implements policies aimed at increasing the competitiveness of their economies. These policies, while running in tandem with the goal of economic diversification and non-oil income, also revolve around harnessing human capital.

Youth under 25 years of age, representing one-half to one-third of the Gulf population, offers a window of opportunity for not only dynamism in productivity but also a talent pool. Likewise, changes in approach from the top, akin to those in Saudi Arabia, have encouraged women to enter the workforce, to the extent that 45 percent of SMEs are female-owned, and 36 percent of the labor pool are women — exceeding Vision 2030's target of 30 percent. Elsewhere in the UAE, 9 females feature in the cabinet while women occupy half of the seats in the Federal National Council as per a 2018 decree by the late President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed. These changes in the workforce and various sectors ultimately touch on the families, directly or otherwise, particularly on the perceived roles of women, the upbringing of youth, and the relevance — and persistence — of traditions. Likewise, attracting foreign talent to keep Gulf economies competitive has the dribble-down effect of everyday interactions between nationals and non-nationals. For countries with smaller national populations, akin to the UAE and Qatar, the ratio of national to expatriate is much more pronounced.

Top-down policies have been rolled out to minimize social friction, but there remains a delicate balance to be struck in the preservation of social mores. The UAE stands out among its neighbors in its policy to grant citizenship to foreign residents — a first in the region — while also emphasizing the values of tolerance and co-existence. Yet, questions surfacing through the prism of national identity continue to be debated.

For example, how is Emirati identity perceived and what are its elements? Across the Gulf Arab states, the demographic imbalance has led to scholarship on social hierarchy and urbanism, on top of understanding how kinship ties have found means to persist and stay relevant. Is this hierarchy fluid or has social order changed or will it change? Finally, across the board, tradition in the Gulf family cannot be discussed without considering the importance of religion.

Two paramount themes emerge: first the practice of religion by families and second, the emphasis on interfaith dialogue, moderation, and tolerance. These social dimensions linked to the family offer important insights into how Gulf societies have metamorphosized since the decades of rapid modernization/urbanization driven by oil wealth.

4. Focus/objectives

Through the stated abstract and context, the workshop will examine the motivations of socio-economic policies by the Gulf states, society's response to the same policies, and how — as a microcosm of society — the Gulf family has negotiated these changes. More often than not, some of these changes in the region, when observed by the foreign eye, may seem small, but are in fact, more profound to nationals and families themselves. The workshop

hopes to draw interest from Gulf scholars who can bring a local eye to the table and provide a realistic assessment of the policies rolled out by Gulf leaders.

Additionally, the workshop will invite papers that can provide alternative analytical angles, including urbanism, city planning, and anthropology, among others, which will provide a holistic assessment of Gulf societies. Conceptual notions of kinship ties and national-non-national interactions should also be updated to reflect current realities. In accordance with the workshop title, the following areas, divided into three blocks, offer conceptual and policy-related departure points for discussion and papers.

To this end, the workshop looks to invite applications that address, in whole or in part, the following themes:

Block I: Transition - What are the motivations behind the key economic policies of Gulf leaders and what kind of society are they aiming to create? What are the challenges on the social level, observed both at the macro- and micro-(family-) levels? What are the local perceptions of government-related policies related to youth and women? Have their roles in the family changed and how? How have the interactions between nationals and non-nationals changed across the region? What are the aims of various Gulf governments and how have local families and individuals reacted?

Block II: Tradition - How do Gulf authorities strike a balance in their policies between change and the preservation of national identity (including, but not limited to customs and traditions)? What are the motivations and aims of these policies? Is religion still an integral part of national identity? Is there a clear line between personal faith and state religion? To what extent has the policy of tolerance and moderation reached the local populations? Does generational change play a role in the local understanding of social mores? Is the family still the anchor for youth? Does the state provide guidance and/or narratives aimed at building social/cultural capital?

Block III: Tenacity - What are some of the bottom-up approaches to preserving customs and traditions? Are kinship ties still important and how far do they extend from the nuclear family? How are inter-family connections sustained and how has the notion of social status changed within the national population? Is tribalism still relevant as a concept and psyche in Gulf societies? What are some of the enduring values and principles despite the changes and reforms across the Gulf Arab states?

5. Papers focus/topics

Submissions for the workshop must be related to the Gulf family, broadly defined not only as society and/or governance, but also as family units or microcosms of society. Topics include, but need not be confined to:

- Legal and social reforms that touch on personal and family law/circumstances. How have these been received on the ground? What are the motivations behind such reforms?
- Social order and inter-family connections: is there still an implicit hierarchy among nationals? How are kinship ties maintained?

- Customs and traditions: how are social mores preserved, both through top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives? How do we define Gulf identity?
- The national-foreigner binary: will the latest policies aimed at attracting foreign talent create more friction in Gulf societies? Are there accompanying social policies aimed at mitigating negative externalities?
- Urbanism: how has/will city planning affect(ed) families in terms of cohesion and encounters with the foreign population?
- Religion: is religion an integral part of identity in the region and how is it dealt with in the family? Is there a state-sanctioned drive to separate personal faith from state religion?
- Meritocracy: is there evidence of upward social mobility for families to move into the upper-middle class?
- How have state-led policies targeted the youth and female segments to rope them into the workforce and harness their potential? Will such moves alter their roles in the family?

Please refer also to sections 4 and 7 for indications concerning paper focus/topics.

6. Paper structure, referencing, and format

Please make sure that the submitted paper is clearly structured and is as close to being ready for publication as possible.

Authors should also adhere to the [GRM Paper Guidelines](#).

Participants who do not submit a paper by the 31 May 2024 deadline or whose submitted paper does not meet the requirements will be disinvited by GRCC.

7. Publication plans

Volume title: Negotiating Nationals Visions: Transition and Tradition in Gulf Societies
Introduction: Bracing the Gulf Family for the Next Generation

- Chapter 1. Motivations and responses to legal and social reforms across the Gulf states
- Chapter 2. Top-down and bottom-up approaches to preserving customs and traditions
- Chapter 3. The role of religion: private sphere, public sphere, or somewhere in-between?
- Chapter 4. Is there still an “ethnocracy” in national-foreigner interactions?
- Chapter 5. Hope of a better age: harnessing youth capital in the Gulf workforce
- Chapter 6. City planning in the Gulf: is the self-preservation of families a means of isolation?
- Chapter 7. Challenging norms: the evolving role of women at home and in office

- Chapter 8. A fluid middle class? Upward social mobility among non-traditional business families
- Chapter 9. Governing as a family: the relationship between the ruling families and the ruled
- Chapter 10. Nationalism and the family: garnering local support for transformative national policies
- Conclusion by Clemens Chay and Ebtesam Al-Teneiji

Papers that may not be publishable in the edited volume will still be reviewed by the directors and considered for individual publication in either a peer-reviewed journal or as a GLMM explanatory note. Directors will make reasonable efforts to ensure that all accepted papers are published in one of these three forms.

8. References

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Foley, Sean. *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture, and Society in the Kingdom*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2019.

Hassan, Islam. "Social Stratification in Qatari Society: Family, Marriage, and Khalījī Culture." *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 16 (2018), pp. 144-169.

Mejias, Sam, Rania Al-Nakib, Abdullah Al-Khonaini and Rana Khazbak. "Youth citizenship identities in Kuwait: the role of citizenship education and the Kuwaiti Diwaniya." LSE Middle East Centre Kuwait Programme Paper Series (19).

Thompson, Mark and Neil Quilliam (eds). *Governance and Domestic Policy-Making in Saudi Arabia*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2022.

Thompson, Mark. *Being Young, Male and Saudi: Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Weiner, Scott. "Rethinking Patriarchy and Kinship in the Arab Gulf States." POMEPS Memo, 2016.

9. Directors' bio notes

Dr. Clemens Chay is a research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute. His research focuses on the history and politics of the Gulf states. At MEI he spearheads a public education series entitled "Bridging the Gulf." His recent academic publications include a chapter that examines Kuwait's parliamentary politics in *The Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics* (2020), and a chapter in the edited volume *Informal Politics in the Middle East* (Hurst, 2021). His commentaries also feature across different outlets, including ISPI, KFCRIS, and AGSIW. He is currently working on a book project related to Kuwait's diwanias (affectionately known as diwawin, and more widely known as majlis outside Kuwait), the reception rooms for informal meetings that have implications for society, politics, and diplomacy. Prior to joining MEI, Dr. Chay was the Al-Sabah fellow at Durham University, where he taught and completed his Ph.D. in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and where he also received an MSc in defense, development, and diplomacy.

Dr Ebtesam Al Teneiji is the Director of Engagement and Publications at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) and a faculty member at the Government and Society Department at the United Arab Emirates University. Before joining ECSSR in July 2021, Al Teneiji served as the Director of the UAE University Center for Public Policy and Leadership. Al Teneiji received both a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership and Consulting and an M.A. in Leadership Studies from the University of San Diego, USA. Her research interest is focused on studying intergenerational value changes in fast-changing societies such as the case of the UAE and cultural changes in general.