Identity and Regional Conflicts in the Arabian Gulf

ABSTRACT This article discusses the complex issue of identity and citizenship in the Arab Gulf, while alluding to the wider context of societies and their challenges. It argues that despite the significant changes Gulf societies have undergone, identity still plays a determining role at both the individual and communal levels. KEYWORDS Arab Gulf, identity, Arab identity, modernity, Gulf crisis

INTRODUCTION

Identity is an essential component of any society. Its composing elements vary from one group to another, not just when comparing between different societies, but even within the same group. Although some elements can be transnational, in traditional societies where state institutions and functions have still not been fully established, and where the culture of democracy and the rule of law and citizenship have still not been embodied in the state and society structure, the issue of identity components represents the standard upon which social, economic, and political resources are distributed. In other words, identity, given its ethnic and religious diversity, is systematically used to protect the interest of the dominant group to prevent its share of power from being harmed or altered in the power structure within society. Moreover, the issue of identity has also been used as a means to manipulate political situations, whether internal or external, and in regional conflicts. Thus, conflict between some of the Gulf States and Iraq with Iran have always been approached through the prism of their religious and ethnic differences rather than from a political approach.

Identity has become an important variable in the relationship between Western countries and the Arab region, and with other regions in the developing world, to the extent that some recently founded countries were established according to their identity components. These include East
Timor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and South Sudan, and even Iraqi Kurdistan would also have succeeded in establishing itself as a “new” nation after its referendum for independence in September 2017, had it not been for the intervention of powerful regional states such as Turkey and Iran.

Western powers often embrace ethnic and religious minorities against the dominant or authoritative state as a tool to split society. Some Arab nationalist groups have systematically taken an inflexible stance with regards the cultural and political rights of ethnic and religious minorities and considered that by calling for their rights, the actions of minorities were tantamount to a betrayal of the nation. It is noteworthy that some countries in the region that have enjoyed some kind of stability have tended to affirm the identity of their “Bedouin” culture in the face of “modernity” and demand political reform, while emphasizing Bedouin artforms in dance, song, poetry, camel racing, and dress and emphasizing that Bedouin patterns should be visible in culture and society as a whole.

IDENTITY: A VISIT OF THE CONCEPT

Given the complexity of issue, how, therefore, can identity be defined? Identity is a complex mixture of cultural, social, political, and, to a certain degree, ethnic components operating within a cycle of constant change, never fixed or static. Identity is constantly subjected to the influence of many factors. Some of its components can change but never drastically, and some have the ability to adapt to the changes in its environment. However, its key components remain resilient to change. These are religion and ethnicity, which for some are considered to be the safeguards of identity preservation, allowing identity to survive and adapt to change without being influenced. In some cases, or stages, these aspects of identity, if subjected to internal and external manipulation, can be the source of rifts in society leading to ethnic or religious clashes.

There are many cases in which Arab, Muslim, and Asian groups migrating to the West and America have managed to preserve their ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities in the host countries without being obliged to change their life styles substantially. This is particularly true amongst first-generation migrants. The main reasons for the persistence of identity amongst immigrant groups is their tendency to live in close proximity to each other, which gives them a degree of support and solidarity, and their preference for internal (endogamous) marriage based on ethnic, nationality, religious, or sectarian
backgrounds even among the second generation of Arab and Muslim immigrants in the diaspora.

Identity can be but a set of circles that may sometimes be substantially small, overlapping or identifying with each other in periods of stability and peace, and separated from each other in periods of conflict.

An individual may perceive his identity by recognizing the differences between himself and others, and not their similarities, thus being aware of their identity through the differences in language, religion, ethnic and tribal origins, and perhaps color. This may also include a style of dress, traditional food, and may even be reflected in the social ceremonies such as weddings, celebrations, and religious practices. The likelihood of the identity of an individual or group disappearing is slight. In fact, some of the components of an identity may even constitute a part of a larger identity, only coming to light either intentionally by the individual or when provoked by authorities or other groups, leading it to differentiate itself in various ways that may sometimes be violent or destructive, thus causing irreparable harm to the state and society. Eloquent examples of this were the extent to which identity conflicts occurred in the tragic events that took place in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and ex-Yugoslavia (Al-Najjar 2008a).

This means that the deepening of existing sub-identities in society has led—as shown by most Arab experiences—to social and security controls breaking down, which in some cases has weakened the state, rendering it unable to function properly and damaging its relations with the international community (Khafaji 2018).

Identity also consists of other various elements, some of which are historical, geographical, regional, ethnic, and based on class and profession. As pointed out above, these elements can overlap others, forming circles that may be shared with individuals from other societies. These may be ethnic, linguistic, religious, tribal, and sectarian.

Castells (1997, 7) argues that all identities are constructed from building materials taken from history, geography, religion, local narrative, and collective memory, which are produced and reproduced by institutions from power apparatuses. Nevertheless, individuals, social groups, communities, and societies process all these inputs and rearrange their meaning according to their needs, determinations and cultural projects that are deeply rooted in their social structure and in their space.

Populations in Middle Eastern countries are principally Muslim by religion, although there are substantial majorities of non-Muslims, too. Moreover, Islam
itself has various sub-identities, including Sunni, Shiite, Druze, and Ibadi, and each sect has subdivisions or schools of thought. There are also multiple ethnic identities within Muslim countries, including Arab, Amazigh, African, Persian, and Kurd. All the above categories fall under their own smaller identity affiliations that distinguish them on a regional, tribal, or religious basis from other groups (Al-Najjar 2013).

Although Muslims around the world may generally share the same religious practices and values, they also define their identities along their tribal, ethnic, and sect affiliation. In fact, sometimes their sub-affiliation has more influence on them than their common religious beliefs.

Although religion, sect, and ethnicity are essential elements in constructing any identity constantly changing demographic movements, the exchange of ideas, beliefs, and technology that are taking place globally tend to have an effect on making identity very integrated and fragile (Castells 1997). We have seen how these affiliations influenced the civil wars in Syria and Iraq and, before that, in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Some analysts proposed that the Western colonial powers have employed these regions to achieve their interests in the region and perpetuate division in explaining issues relating to conflicts based on identity. However, such an approach does not suffice in understanding the reality currently playing out in Britain, France, and Spain that can only be attributed to problems emerging from ethnic/regional identities. In modern times, Europe experienced the rise of ethnic identities even before World War II. In Germany, the rise of Nazi and fascist identities took the racist trend to the ultimate extremes, leading Europe to the disastrous events that only subsided when new cultural/political paradigms were adopted. Although these were successful, today Europe still cannot prevent identity issues within its territory from resurfacing; issues that threaten the unity of some European countries still persist and, recently, almost caused the breakdown of the Spanish state (the referendum in Catalonia), forcing the state to intervene and deem it illegal, and the Scottish referendum on separation from Britain (Imad 2017, 14).

Certain identity groups based on sectarian, tribal, or ethnic specificities tend to seek political independence from larger or legitimized identities on the notion that independence will bring about solutions to their political, economic, and social problems. However, power relations, subjugation, exclusion, and domination usually imposed by dominant identities, or what Castells (1997) calls “legitimized identities,” do not necessarily cease by achieving political independence and the formation of new political entities; rather, their
problems may even become more serious if separation is indeed achieved. South Sudan is one such example. The state of injustice and discrimination experienced by the inhabitants of this region under the Khartoum government is unjustified. Yet, it seems that their political and economic situation only worsened after independence.

Kurdistan could be another example. Mustafa Barzani’s tendency to realize the dream of a separate Kurdish state could lead to economic collapse and to political and social unrest. This would not necessarily be due solely to the neighboring countries’ rejection of Kurdish independence, but also to the potential outbreak of conflict within a Kurdish state itself, as some Kurdish parties and political groups who would reject the domination of Barzani and his party, the expense of state institutions, and the absence of the concept of a peaceful power transfer between the influential dominant political forces, could also be factors contributing to its eventual collapse. Whatever the case may be, even with encouragement from regional powers, any call for separation of the western part of Iraq (a Sunni region) from the rest of Iraq is unlikely to come about as it would have to struggle for economic survival. In fact, this call for separation reflects the struggle for power and wealth rather than being an expression of differences in the cultural and social components of the population’s identity. Even if it were a form of identity expression, it does not have the ability and flexibility to adapt to the dominant political environment. Adaptation can reflect a tendency to preserve cultural identity (whether ethnic or religious) and to reproduce it in contrast to the existing one.

The tendency of many groups to achieve some kind of political independence is generally derived from what groups consider to be the economic and social injustice inflicted on them. Catalonia, in Spain, is one such example. The Catalans’ claim for political independence from Spain is based on the premise that theirs is the wealthiest region in the Spanish state and should not be expected to carry the burden of the poverty of other Spanish regions under state authority; they also consider themselves as ethnically and linguistically different from the rest of Spain (Imad 2017).

When larger identities provoke those of smaller groups, the latter are driven to solidify their identities further, whether they be ethnic or religious affiliations. These components, being influenced by the forces and mechanisms of globalization, drive the respected groups to represent themselves in brutal ways, as in the cases of Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. This reality belies the view that globalization leads to cultural identification and integration between societies and nations. In fact, solidification around identity
seems to be a strategy of marginalized groups to preserve their cultural entity; to defend their interests and preserve their influence and power in society. Indeed, the establishment of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) across its seven sheikhdoms—formerly called the Emirates of Trucial States—represented a new political identity and unified its cultural component (Kasim 2013).

Some identities may form with the emergence of new political entities. American identity arose with the establishment of the United States of America, and both Pakistan and Israel are relatively recent political entities that were founded on religious identity.

The establishment of the UAE has created a new political identity, one which the state has assumed since its foundation in the early 1970s, even though the UAE’s constituent state maintains its social and cultural diversity.

THE GULF: HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY

We shall start by emphasizing the following facts:

- Most of what is regarded in Arabic writings as historical and cultural “constant” components of Arab identity have gone through significant changes caused by the globalization process and the economic and social changes the Arab region has undergone over the last few decades. Hence, due to racial, cultural intermingling, and demographic/geographical shifts in Arab countries, these constants components have taken on a controversial overtone, considered by some as causing a division between people and isolation from the rest of the world.

- The geographical location of the Gulf region was the eastern contact line between the Arab world and Eastern civilizations, specifically Persia, India, and China, whether in historical or contemporary frameworks. Therefore, it would be erroneous to see the Gulf region as a place inhabited by introverted desert communities, since these regions and maritime areas were economically, socially, and culturally formed and developed based on their geographical contact with others.

While the populations of these regions have retained their own cultural and social traits, they have overlapped with other racial, religious, and ethnic elements through contact with nearby and distant communities. For example, the geographical, religious, and cultural intermingling of people in the Hijaz region has generated identity components different from the population in other regions of the
eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, or in the regions of the center and south. The identity of the population in the Hijaz has historical ties with the Levant, Yemen, and Africa, while the people in eastern regions represent a cultural extension of the Arabian Gulf. As for people in the central regions, owing to their geographical isolation, they have maintained their identity components unchanged, despite the major transformations they have experienced over the past six or seven decades.

However, all these regions have had their identity reconfigured or unified by: (1) the rise of a central state; (2) the use of oil revenues to re-engineer cultural, political, and social settings; and (3) the role of the religious institute and the “Wahhabinisation” of Saudi society, to the extent that even social/cultural differences between their regions and sects have become minimal. The *niqab* imposed by the Wahhabi establishment on Saudi women over the forty years has unified their appearance by obliging them to cover their face and body (Al-Ibrahim and Al-Sadiq 2012; Alqahtani 2012).

Furthermore, the wars that erupted during the past decades in and around the Gulf have further influenced the identity overlap, causing an influx of people of different racial/cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This, and the abundance of wealth and huge rates of consumption, have helped to integrate this region further into the world’s economic system.

- The wars that have waged in and around the region—whether directly or by proxy—in addition to the huge wealth, open markets, and the importation of goods and people, will drastically transform this region, socially and politically. These effects may require political and cultural adjustment that cannot be achieved within the current existing context, and may lead to unintended and unforeseen social and political implications (Al-Najjar 2018).

According to Samuel Huntington (Huntington 2011), the globalization process has created a clash between various identities from ethnic to tribal, religious, and sectarian. These identities have all too often been manipulated internally by political forces, and externally by regional or international powers in wars waged in and around the Gulf region against what these forces and powers call “terrorist groups.” These clashes are the expressions of identity groups’ fears of change or of losing or seeing diminished some of their benefits because of their ethnic/tribal or sectarian affiliation, or of losing control over their territories and its resources, fear of the rising influence and
power of certain tribal, sectarian or ethnic groups, and even fear of how identity issues are used in regional conflicts and thereby threaten the region’s stability (Al-Najjar 2018).

Some regional powers have resorted to playing the card of identity issues in their political conflicts in attempts to prevent political events from storming the region and affecting their domestic affairs, and have worked to construct and inflate the political identity of Islam vis-à-vis Arab nationalism, or have fueled the Sunni identity vis-à-vis the Shia one. This has necessitated the use of Gulf oil resources to build a coalition based on religion and sect, both internally and externally. Domestically, this practice has not solved any of the internal or regional problems and may even carry delayed, and serious repercussions inherent in it that are no less perilous than what some Arab countries in the region are currently experiencing. The current chaotic storm sweeping the region is, to a large extent, due to the lack of good governance, unjust distribution of national wealth, lack of the rule of law and democracy, and in some cases systematic discrimination against some ethnic and minority groups.

The term “Shiite-phobia” came into use after the Iranian Revolution when Iran’s attempts to export the revolution through the ideology of the new regime forced some countries in the region to react in the same manner. This is due to Iran’s increasing influence over some Shia political groups that have welcomed the so-called ideology of the Absolute Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist “Welayat-El-Faqih,” in some Gulf countries including Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and, to a very lesser extent, in the rest of the region. As a result, a backlash has initiated a mobilization of Sunni political groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan) and Salafist groups, with the region becoming a hub for dissident Ikhwan leaders from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and North Africa, and the wide use of social media, local newspapers, local and Arab journalists and intellectuals strengthening the role of the religious institutions in the public sphere, amplifying the Sunni identity vis-à-vis the Shia identity and what it called the “Iranian or Safavid tide,” and the threat posed by the Iranian regime to the Gulf and the Arab world.

It is important to state that just as Iran has sought to extend its influence to some Shia political Islamic groups and communities in the Arab region in general, some regional parties have also thought of doing the same with Sunnis from various ethnic groups, including Arabs, Baluchies, Kurds, and Turkmen in Iran. This, in turn, has prompted Iran to accuse some regional countries of igniting the unrest that occurred in early January 2018, and in
the armed attack led by ISIS on the Iranian army parade in September in Ahvaz (the capital of Khuzestan province) commemorating the Iran–Iraq War. Attempts to have Turkey join the alliance versus Iranian influence failed due to the good relations that Iran managed to build with Turkey when Turkey unofficially accused Saudi Arabia and the UAE of supporting the anti-Erdogan military attempted coup in July 2016. In fact, Turkey came to be seen as a threat to some Gulf countries due to its ties and strong military presence in Qatar and its support of the Ikhwan parties of the Arab region.

In order to bolster support for the status quo, the Gulf countries have encouraged the rejection of groups of people now branded as “aliens”; such groups include Iranian Shias, Ibadi, and Durzi; people of other faiths such as Christians and Hindus; or people (political groups) committed to ideologies such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan), Nasserists, communists, or citizens such as the Ajam and Hawaleh who are not affiliated to any particular tribe, as well as foreign workers who could aspire to attaining equality and the rule of law within a liberal democracy through the politicization of identity (Gengler 2016, 6).

Nonetheless, while identities can be employed in conflicts between countries, it should be noted that fanaticism and misplaced/misguided zealotry in general is not predominant. In fact, it is mostly dormant, only awakening in reaction to internal and external political events and, occasionally, spontaneously, without any interference.

Some Arab Gulf countries have used their huge oil revenues and media empires to construct a new identity or inflating an existing one in the face of any threat, whatever the source may be, whether it be from internal ethnic or tribal groups or from any external threat. In the absence of the notion of the modern state, any challenge posed to any political regime in the Gulf by any political group will be viewed along the lines of the sectarian or tribal components of that group.

The social status and the economic and political share of the citizens of Gulf States depend on their ascribed tribal, religious, and ethnic identity. A pyramid of citizenship in the Gulf societies is codified in law, in encoded customs, and the official orders, wishes and comments of the sheikh, in individual and institutional practices, and in the public imagination transmitted through social media, official newspapers, local radio and television, and school curricula, all of which make clear society’s descent-based dividing lines. This naked differentiation of social groupings means not simply that some citizens have a greater personal interest in maintaining the prevailing system,
but also that the relative incentives of all groups to support the state as the ultimate benefactor are clearly understood by all. However, some naturalized citizens, in nearly all Gulf countries, have limited social and economic rights in comparison with native-born citizens and, in some cases, they transmit their status and rights to their sons and grandsons. In Qatar, for example, naturalized Qataris and their great-grandsons, despite the fact that some of them have been there since the 1930s and 1940s, do not enjoy the same employment opportunities and housing services as their fellow citizens (Gengler 2016, 9).

In general, identities in the Arab region and the Arabian Gulf take the following duality:

- Muslims vis-à-vis non-Muslims (Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, or others).
- Sunnis vis-à-vis Shiites (or Alawite, Zaidi, Druze, Ibadi, and others).
- Najdi tribes vis-à-vis other tribes (Anza, Shamar, Matran, Marra, Hawagir, Qahtan, etc.).
- Urban residents vis-à-vis Bedouins (rural or desert people, and others).
- Najadi vis-à-vis Hijazi, and others.
- Assil vis-à-vis Albisari,¹ and others.
- Arabs vis-à-vis Ajam (Baloch and others).
- Citizens vis-à-vis foreigners (Arabs, Indians, Iranians, Filipinos, and others).
- Men vis-à-vis women.

These identities and sub-identities are easily and widely employed in times of internal or external crises, whether in power struggles between the ruling family vis-à-vis other ethnic/tribal or political groups or in struggles to resist changes in the existing unequal distribution of wealth and social benefits and economic rewards. These policies, which may have some benefits for those who adopted them in the short and medium terms, may in the long term lead to devastating consequences for society and the state.

¹. Asel is a Persian word used in the Gulf in reference to the pure-blooded Najdi tribes. Albisari refers to a tribe whose origins are unknown.
To illustrate this point, see how the use of Shia versus Sunni and Arab versus Kurd in the struggle for power or sovereignty is now deeply rooted in Iraqi society, so much so that it has become extremely difficult for the state to establish itself in the prevailing political environment. This seemingly disastrous situation was not created solely by regional and international powers: the Iraqis themselves played a significant role in the division that plagues Iraqi society today. Similarly, in Syria, aggravating the ethnic and sectarian identities in Syrian society also contributed to that country’s destruction. Thus, a society once considered modernist, before the civil war, has since descended into a sectarian, tribal, and ethnic quagmire.

Mohammed al-Rumaihi points to the fact that, for society to succeed in emerging from the impasse of this internal dichotomy a policy of “defensive modernization,” as he terms it, must be adopted. This concept is based on the following four basic rules:

- Supremacy of the rule of law.
- Inviolability of public money.
- Upholding of human rights.
- Integration of citizens in the economic and political modernization processes.

In other words, the adoption of the means to protect the people and institutions from any imbalance that aims to employ internal diversity in a fight for power requires the ability and discipline to manage differences efficiently through modern means and institutions (al-Rumaihi 2018).

THE MAKING OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

Even though some identities arise with the emergence of the state, others called “artificial identities” can be created. Some countries in their conflict with other countries may resort to media policies based on rhetoric, narrative, and articles written by newspaper columnists that can eventually lead to the creation of a trumped-up identity to enable regimes to mobilize the masses behind them, or in efforts to rally groups in other countries behind them through new political alliances. Within these contexts and political environments, such identities tend to develop in regional and international conflicts. Designations such as the “Arab left” versus the “Arab right,” the “radical Arab states” versus “the conservative,” and “moderate” or “Arab Sunni states” are,
in fact, expressions of new political identities channeled by various means into the internal practices of these countries on all levels: social, economic, and political. These artificial identities, along with their corresponding tools of think tanks, media, and social media, and the writings of regime intellectuals, are mobilized by countries against foreign countries or against internal rivals. Some of these identities were created by the Western politics and think tanks and exported to the Arab regions.

Before the fall of Iraq and Libya and the Syrian conflict, these countries were referred to as “radical states,” in contrast to the Arab monarchies in the Gulf, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt, which were considered as conservative or moderate ones. However, the emergence of Iran as a regional player in the Arab region and its alliances with some Shia political groups in Iraq and Lebanon, and with the Syrian regime, has constructed a sectarian identity known as the “Shiite alliance” against the “Sunni coalition,” which now includes the conservative or moderate Arab countries, and may extend to encompass Egypt, Sudan, and even Pakistan. In other words, religion has given identity a convenient dimension for mobilization against others, as well as for forming alliances with similar countries (Al-Najjar 2008b). Such identities may even be the creation of Western think tanks. Expressions such as “Our Sunni Arab states allies” have become widely used by the Western media, as well as in the general narrative and writings of Western politicians and think tanks. It has also become widely used by some political Islamic groups, journalists, and widely in social media. This is an expression of a political–religious identity versus the “other.”

In major Arab media stations such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and other Iranian space channels such as Al-Alam and many others, as well as local and trans-Arab newspapers, official and unofficial platforms, and even at the level of social media, bilateral religious identities have all become widely used in their conflict with Iran, and its local allies and at the state level. It is a tool for policies that may serve a key political function, while at the same time it is deepening the internal divisions within the region, one that was known historically for its religious, sectarian, and ethnic plurality.

Finally, the recent rift between Qatar and the other three Gulf countries in the region has also employed to some degree the use of sub-identities in their conflict, specifically mobilizing tribal and sectarian differences to deepen internal divisions or to booster the Bedouin affiliation in order to gain the support of other Bedouin tribes in other countries.
CONCLUSIONS

Despite the scale of change and the transformations the Gulf States have undergone, the entire society is still governed by a system of traditional sociocultural patterns that determine the position and status of individuals and group quotas in the power structure. Although the original affiliations of people are prone to change, they continue to remain effective in the most critical decisions. In fact, they determine the position and status of citizens in their society. New class configurations for individuals and their political affiliations are still incomplete. Indeed, in some cases, they are stumbling blocks to any political, cultural, and social change. One may say that existing social and cultural contexts even revive some elements of the original identity to outweigh any modernist elements. This is so much so that the needs of people in some countries are no longer feasible without asserting these original identities—a situation that I once referred to as “abstinent modernity”. This is not due to a refusal to respond to the changes and elements of modernity, but is attributed to the disruption of modernity as a cultural, intellectual, social, political, and economic component, in individuals and between groups, and even in the practices of the state, its institutions, and structural function.

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