



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



Redefining Gulf Security Begins by Including the
Human Dimension

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Executive Summary

The concept of Gulf security usually focuses on regime stability, territorial integrity against potential external aggression, military procurements, and the free flow of oil and gas. However, the health crisis brought about by the coronavirus pandemic has confirmed what has been increasingly apparent in the past few years: Gulf security is first and foremost human security.

It is crucial to bring the human security aspect front and center in the debates on Gulf security as it encompasses critical challenges for the region's population, but also because recent and increasing sources of human insecurity threaten some of the foundational premises underpinning the politics of the Gulf Arab states, particularly their rentier political economy and regime-centric approach to security. This paper reframes human security issues as an inherent part of national security in the Gulf states and suggests innovative and pertinent ways to address future challenges with greater inclusivity.

In particular, it reviews the risks that the Gulf countries face regarding public health, food, and water security, as well as environmental security more broadly. It then assesses how these issues directly challenge some of their traditional definitions of security, in economic and strategic contexts. Finally, it offers some pathways to tackle the multifaceted security challenges the future holds for Gulf countries.

Introduction

Most discussions about Gulf security have traditionally focused on questions pertaining to securing the free flow of oil and gas as well as goods to international markets, countering the multifaceted Iranian threat, addressing terrorism concerns, and maintaining the internal stability of the monarchical regimes of the Arabian Peninsula. To be sure, these issues are crucial in the region and they notably – albeit partly – explain the Gulf Arab countries' skyrocketing military spending and arms procurement. The emphasis on these topics also reflects two intermingled points. First, Gulf security has long been defined by the security concerns and interests of external actors. Second, the general acceptance of this concept by policymakers, analysts, and practitioners, both inside and outside the region, has largely matched a view of security “that shaped and was shaped by Cold War Security Studies – a concept that is decidedly state-centric, military-focused and directed outwards.”¹ However, the coronavirus pandemic has come as a reminder of the urgent need for a renewed approach to security that no longer focuses merely on the political and military aspects of security but includes a broader look at people-centered dimensions. For too long, the concept of security “has been interpreted narrowly ... it has been related more to nation states than to people.”²

Human security is defined by the United Nations as an approach to identify and address “widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity” of people.³ As the events of 2020 have made apparent, some of the main risks weighing on populations

¹ “Pinar Bilgin – Interview,” *E-International Relations*, July 23, 2019. This is the premise of her book: Pinar Bilgi, *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2019, 2nd edition).

² Mary Kaldor, *Human Security: Reflections on Globalization and Intervention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 182.

³ “What is Human Security?,” United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, accessed, October 23, 2020.

and threatening human security pertain to health concerns, access to food and water, and the natural disasters amplified by climate change. When it comes to the Gulf region, concerns about these aspects of security are not new. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen's "Insecure Gulf" in 2011 argued that "a human security approach, focused on the needs of communities and individuals, may provide the optimal policy instrument for strengthening societal cohesion and state-society relations,"⁴ which could help renew the polities of the Gulf Arab states and the legitimacy of their leaders in a globalizing world by being more inclusive of the needs of the population instead of keeping their attention on their own political interests and military concerns. However, the Arab Spring uprisings and subsequent regional turmoil led regimes to focus even further on their stability, pushing to the background the imperative to update threat definition and prioritization.

As the events of 2020 have made apparent, some of the main risks weighing on populations and threatening human security pertain to health concerns, access to food and water, and the natural disasters amplified by climate change.

Today, it is vital to bring the human security aspect front and center in the debates on Gulf security as it encompasses critical challenges for Gulf populations, but also because emerging sources of human insecurity threaten some of the foundational premises underpinning the polities of the Gulf Arab states, particularly their rentier political economy and regime-centric approach to security. This paper reframes human security issues as an inherent part of national security in the Gulf states through an assessment of how the main risks weighing on populations also represent a stress test for regimes and some of the traditional dynamics that have so far ensured their stability. It then explores options for regional actors to address future challenges with greater inclusivity.

Critical Issues Pertaining to Gulf Human Security

Public Health Security

The most glaring human security challenge in the Gulf pertains to public health, as the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has made apparent. As of mid-September, with just above 77,000 cases, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries comprised 43.5% of total cases in the Middle East and North Africa, while Iraq and Iran respectively made up 16.5% and 22.8% of the regional total.⁵ However, looking at mortality rates, the GCC states appear far from being the most affected by the disease. Western countries have been among the hardest hit with death rates per 100,000 people at 66.14 for Spain, 63.04 for the United Kingdom, and 61.37 for the United States. The GCC countries' numbers are more encouraging, according to the Johns Hopkins University of Medicine's Coronavirus Resource Center, with 17.91 for Oman, 14.46 for Bahrain, 14.21 for Kuwait, 13.48 for Saudi Arabia, 7.59 for Qatar, and 4.21 for the United Arab

⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (London: Hurst, 2011), 140.

⁵ "Latest on the Region's Covid-19 Recovery," *Middle East Business Intelligence*, September 16, 2020.

Emirates.⁶ This has a lot to do with the age of the population: The median age in the entire GCC region is 27 years, with over 20% of the population below the age of 15,⁷ while it is 44 in Spain, 40 in the United Kingdom, and 38 in the United States. While age demographics play a key role in mortality rates with the coronavirus, two other factors are equally important: testing and intensive care unit capacity.⁸

Overall, the Gulf Arab states were quite well prepared to face the pandemic. The World Health Organization, assessing the preparedness of countries around the world for the coronavirus in mid-March, had evaluated that all GCC states except Qatar had the best or close-to-best sustainable capacities in this area.⁹ To be sure, for decades before the pandemic hit, these countries had substantially invested in their health-care systems and focused specific efforts on increasing their numbers of doctors and nurses. Additionally, they benefit from vast economic resources that allowed them to acquire medical supplies and immediately respond to the pandemic through substantive stimulus packages, including loans and government support to the private sector.¹⁰

Crucial health challenges prevalent in the Gulf states, including high rates of diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular diseases, are critical risk factors for hospitalization and mortality in cases of COVID-19 infections.

Nonetheless, the pandemic uncovered some underlying vulnerabilities concerning public health in the Gulf countries: severe inequalities between locals and migrants and preexisting health conditions in large portions of the populations. Migrant workers, who comprise more than 80% of the population in Qatar and the UAE, 70% in Kuwait, and more than 50% in Bahrain, have been “at the epicenter of the public health crisis in the Gulf.”¹¹ Their poor economic and living conditions, including inadequate access to health care, put them at greater risk of infection than locals.

Crucial health challenges prevalent in the Gulf states, including high rates of diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular diseases, are critical risk factors for hospitalization and mortality in cases of COVID-19 infections. According to the International Diabetes Federation, the proportion of diabetes among adults aged 20-79 is particularly important in the Gulf Arab states and is a leading cause of death in people under 60. Of adults aged 20-79, 10.1% have diabetes in Oman (where 58% of deaths in people under 60 are diabetes related), 12.2% in Kuwait (55.3%), 15.6% in Qatar (65.3%), 15.6% in Bahrain (76.8%), 15.8% in Saudi Arabia (68.4%), and 16.3% in the UAE (72.1%).¹²

⁶ “Mortality Analyses,” Johns Hopkins’ University of Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, accessed September 23, 2020.

⁷ Abdulrazak Abyad, “Demographic Changes in the GCC Countries: Reflection and Future Projection,” *Middle East Journal of Age and Ageing* 15, no. 1 (2018): 20-24.

⁸ “Virus: Qatar has the Lowest Mortality Rate in the World,” *Gulf Times*, May 5, 2020.

⁹ “Updated Country Preparedness and Response Status for COVID-19,” World Health Organization, March 16, 2020.

¹⁰ Nawafel Shehab, “Exploring Gulf Responses to COVID-19,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, June 25, 2020.

¹¹ Eman Alhussein, “Migrant Workers at the Epicenter of Public Health Crisis in the Gulf,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, April 24, 2020.

¹² “IDF Diabetes Atlas: 9th Edition 2019,” International Diabetes Federation, accessed September 24, 2020.

Food Security and Water Scarcity

Beyond the immediate and multifaceted challenges to health systems, the coronavirus pandemic has revived concerns about risks pertaining to food security and water scarcity in the Gulf states. According to the definition established at the 1996 World Food Summit, food security is a situation “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food,” and it relies on four pillars: physical availability, economic and physical access, food utilization, and stability over time.¹³

The Gulf region has “marginal agricultural conditions,” characterized by “high temperatures, poor soil quality and low annual rainfall” and is considered “most vulnerable to water scarcity, salinity and climate change.”¹⁴ These environmental constraints make the GCC countries vulnerable because of their overreliance on imports – with more than 80% of their food supplies coming from international markets. Any disruption in global food supply chains thus puts critical stress on Gulf food security, as was the case during the 2007-08 global food crisis, when food (particularly cereal) prices surged and disrupted the global food system. This was not due to insufficient funding to allocate toward food imports, but “because countries were not willing to sell.”¹⁵ Major rice-producing countries, for instance, stopped exporting rice in the face of shortages and rising prices at home, in turn causing panic buying in other countries that added to the increase in prices.¹⁶

Learning from this experience, the Gulf countries have ramped up their efforts to ensure food availability and better insulate themselves from the hazards of international markets in times of crisis, which increased their level of preparedness when the coronavirus pandemic hit.¹⁷ They have enhanced their capacity to hold large food reserves and increased financial assistance and subsidies to boost local agricultural production. However, this latter avenue to improve their food autonomy did not make economic sense: Agriculture is responsible for between 60% and 90% of annual water consumption in the Gulf countries while accounting for only 1% to 7% of their gross domestic product.¹⁸ Most important, agriculture is not sustainable in the region without endangering the environment because of water scarcity, rendering self-sufficiency an unattainable goal. Importing food, particularly water-intensive crops, and trading in “virtual water,” is more sustainable.¹⁹

¹³ “An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security,” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, 2008.

¹⁴ Caline Malek, “How GCC Countries are Forging a Food-Secure Future,” *Arab News*, updated January 26, 2020.

¹⁵ Abdunnasser Alshaali, “Food Security Remains a High-Risk Threat,” *Gulf News*, March 31, 2020.

¹⁶ “Causes of the 2007-2008 Global Food Crisis Identified,” *Science for Environment Policy*, European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, January 20, 2011.

¹⁷ “COVID-19 and Its Impact on Food Security in the Near East and North Africa: How To Respond?,” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, 2020.

¹⁸ George O. Odhiambo, “Water Scarcity in the Arabian Peninsula and Socio-Economic Implications,” *Applied Water Science* 7, no. 5 (September 2017): 2,479-92.

¹⁹ According to the World Water Council, “Virtual water is the amount of water that is embedded in food or other products needed for its production. Trade in virtual water allows water scarce countries to import high water consuming products while exporting low water consuming products and in this way making water available for other purposes.” See Mohamed Raouf, “Water Issues in the Gulf: Time for Action,” *Middle East Institute*, January 2009.

In 2009, a report by the United Nations on Arab Human Development estimated that water scarcity itself was one of the gravest threats to human security in the Gulf. The Gulf states have been at the level of “absolute scarcity” concerning their access to water since the 1980s or 1990s.²⁰ For instance, the UAE’s fresh and brackish water reserves could be exhausted by 2050.²¹ Unfortunately, one of the main Gulf practices to secure water, desalination,²² is not only costly at a time of particularly volatile oil prices (as oil is often used to fuel desalination plants and oil revenue predominantly funds this expensive process) but also has negative ecological impacts²³ – which ties into another crucial issue pertaining to Gulf human security: climate change and environmental concerns.

Climate Change and Environmental Security

The Gulf is the region in the world most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In 2007, a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimated that temperatures in the region would increase by up to 2 degrees Celsius in the next 15 to 20 years, and over 4 degrees Celsius by 2100.²⁴ In fact, in 2015, a study published in *Nature Climate Change* showed that the combination of severe humidity and rising temperatures caused by global warming could threaten human life in many Gulf population centers by the end of the century,²⁵ rendering the region uninhabitable in just over three generations.

Of concern is not merely climate change itself, but the incidence of natural disasters it brings. There is “a clear possibility that global warming might intensify atmospheric hazards in the Arabian region leading to increased threats to the existing infrastructure of the coastal regions.”²⁶ These hazards include increased frequency and higher intensities of tropical storms and severe problems of erosion and flooding due to increased events of cloud bursts. While the number of natural disasters around the world doubled between the 1980s and 2010s, in the Middle East and North Africa, it almost tripled

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²⁰ United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report 2009* (New York: U.N. Development Program, 2009); Mai Mahmoud, “Water at the Nexus of Gulf Security and Growth Challenges,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 12, 2016.

²¹ Philippe Boulanger, « Les défis géopolitiques d’une nouvelle puissance régionale : les Emirats arabes unis », *Herodote* 133, no. 2 (2009): 84.

²² See Robert Mogielnicki, “Water Worries: The Future of Desalination in the UAE,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 4, 2020.

²³ Omar Saif, Toufic Mezher, and Hassan A. Arafat, “Water Security in the GCC Countries: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 4, no. 4 (December 2014): 329-46.

²⁴ Cited in George O. Odhiambo, “Water Scarcity in the Arabian Peninsula and Socio-Economic Implications,” *Applied Water Science* 7, no. 5 (September 2017): 2,479-92.

²⁵ Jeremy S. Pal and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, “Future Temperature in Southwest Asia Projected To Exceed a Threshold for Human Adaptability,” *Nature Climate Change*, October 26, 2015; and John Schwartz, “Deadly Heat Is Forecast in Persian Gulf by 2100,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2015.

²⁶ Arun Kumar, “Natural Hazards of the Arabian Peninsula: Their Causes and Possible Remediation,” in *Earth System Processes and Disaster Management*, ed. Rajiv Sinha and Rasik Ravindra (Berlin: Springer, 2013).

over the same period.²⁷ And the Gulf has not been immune: In October 2018, Qatar received a year's worth of rainfall in one day, and, in January, the UAE broke a 24-year rainfall record, experiencing widespread flooding and destruction.²⁸ Another important threat is linked to the rising sea level, which "is expected to directly affect the safety and standards of living of millions of inhabitants of the Arab world's coastal cities in the decades to come."²⁹

Moreover, Gulf environmental security might be threatened by policy choices and practices that focus on short-term benefits, or quick fixes, without addressing the long-term issues, like desalination. Additionally, cloud seeding, a method used to increase precipitation by some Gulf countries, such as the UAE, while considered to have fewer ecological impacts than building a dam, may provoke violent floods.³⁰ More generally, when it comes to facing water scarcity or broader issues connected to climate change, most of these countries have focused their strategies on tracking the impacts and in some cases adapting rather than focusing on mitigation.³¹ Gulf countries have looked to increase the water supply instead of making efforts to reduce water demand. Moreover, they have issued subsidies, contributing to wasteful consumption patterns. For instance, individual daily water consumption of each of the Gulf states of Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE is more than double that of the United Kingdom.³² These policy decisions have a lot to do with the traditional rentier dynamics established between the leadership and society in the Gulf Arab states that have so far contributed to the political stability of the countries. However, these human security challenges are increasingly likely to threaten foundational policies of the Gulf Arab states.

Fundamental Challenges to Traditional Policy Choices and Security Dynamics

Oil Reliance and Rentier Political Economy

Vulnerabilities of Gulf Arab states' economic models have become more apparent in 2020. The double whammy of the coronavirus pandemic combined with the instability of and drop in global oil prices³³ has indeed affected their economies. This is not only because of their

²⁷ Andrea Zanon, "The Threat of Natural Disasters in the Arab Region: How To Weather the Storm," *World Bank Blogs*, November 7, 2013.

²⁸ "Qatar Drenched by Floods as Almost a Year's Rain Falls in One Day," *Middle East Eye*, October 21, 2018; and Julie Celestial, "UAE Smashes 24-Year-Old Rainfall Record, Widespread Flooding and Destruction Reported," *The Watchers*, January 13, 2020.

²⁹ Laurent A. Lambert and Cristina D'Alessandro, "Climate Change, Sea Level Rise, and Sustainable Urban Adaptation in Arab Coastal Cities," *Middle East Institute*, February 12, 2019.

³⁰ Sarah Townsend, "The Cost of Cloud Seeding in the UAE," *Arabian Business*, April 16, 2017.

³¹ Mari Luomi, "Gulf States' Climate Change Policies Amid a Global Pandemic," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, September 25, 2020.

³² Mai Mahmoud, "Water at the Nexus of Gulf Security and Growth Challenges," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 12, 2016.

³³ From an average \$65 per barrel in 2019, prices fell to an average of just above \$40/bbl in 2020 with acute variations – a multiyear low average price in April at just above \$20/bbl and even closing at -\$37 on April 20.

dependence on oil revenue, but also because most of their economic diversification efforts have so far relied on sectors that have been affected by the pandemic, specifically tourism and hospitality.

The coronavirus pandemic and associated public health security concerns add systemic pressure on the economic models of the Gulf Arab states by exposing their two main vulnerabilities: their dependence on oil revenue and the limits or possible unsustainability of their political economy as rentier states, particularly their overreliance on an expatriate workforce. According to the International Monetary Fund's July Regional Economic Outlook, the economies of the Middle East and North Africa are expected to contract by 5.1% in 2020, a steep readjustment to an already grim prediction in April that regional economies would shrink by 3.3%.³⁴ The oil exporters are the most impacted, with an estimated contraction of 7.3%, compared to 1.1% for oil importers. The IMF predicts a rebound as early as 2021, with growth for the Gulf Arab states at around 2.1%, and the U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that worldwide crude oil prices will go up to an average \$47 per barrel in 2021.³⁵ However, this will not mean that the Gulf countries will be out of the woods yet. According to the IMF, Saudi Arabia's breakeven oil price will likely be around \$66/bbl in 2021 – far from the \$47/bbl the EIA projects. Furthermore, assertions in BP's annual energy outlook in September that the era of oil-demand growth is likely over should raise the question for Gulf producers of how to plan for a decline in demand growth or potential peak oil demand.³⁶

Preparing for the post-oil era has been an economic challenge for most of the Gulf states for a long time. Their national "visions" and diversification plans since the mid-1990s aim to address this problem. However, these plans have largely been built on the expansion of a private sector that relies heavily on foreign workers. In Qatar and the UAE, foreigners account for more than 90% of private sector workers, and they comprise 80% in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Now, the coronavirus pandemic is pushing many of these foreigners to leave the Gulf region, in some cases accelerating a return movement that had already started against the backdrop of an ongoing policy to nationalize labor markets in the Gulf Arab states. The International Labor Organization estimates that the exodus in 2020 will exceed those following the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014 oil price drop. This could become a critical economic issue for two reasons. First, it puts Gulf states to the test of replacing these expatriate workers with their own citizens – which they have been unable to do so far. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, 1 million foreign workers have left since 2017 amid increased Saudization efforts, yet unemployment remains at 12% because Saudi citizens often don't accept lower paying jobs.³⁷ In 2020, 1.2 million more foreign workers could leave the kingdom. Second, expatriates generate an important economic demand, and their departure will likely have a negative impact on consumption patterns in the Gulf region. This all has a massive impact on the countries of origin of these

³⁴ International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook Update: Middle East and Central Asia* (Washington, DC: IMF, July 2020).

³⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Short-Term Energy Outlook* (Washington, DC: EIA, October 6, 2020).

³⁶ Robin Mills, "What BP's Claim of an End to Peak Oil Demand Means for Gulf Producers," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, September 23, 2020.

³⁷ Omer Karasapan, "Pandemic Highlights the Vulnerability of Migrant Workers in the Middle East," *Brookings Institution*, September 17, 2020.

migrants, too, which profit from remittances. The Gulf region and South Asia, in particular, “have a highly interdependent relationship, one that has delivered benefits for both sides. So, as the region stumbles, South Asia will feel the pain.”³⁸

Social Inequalities and Fragmented Urban Fabric

The pandemic has revealed inherent vulnerabilities in Gulf models not only from a purely economic perspective but also regarding their societal structure. Societal security is generally understood as “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats.”³⁹ In the Gulf states, particularly where citizens are a minority, such as Qatar, the UAE, and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait, it has usually been tied to the idea that domestic demographic imbalances are a threat – that the overwhelming presence of non-nationals generates cultural anxieties among Gulf nationals and a perceived threat of undermining the national identity.⁴⁰ This widespread perception in the Gulf Arab states, as well as fears of economic loss, largely explains the extreme social fragmentation in these countries’ urban fabrics and the radical social inequalities between nationals and non-nationals, notably when it comes to employment and labor.

The coronavirus pandemic, and the way migrant workers have disproportionately been affected by this public health crisis, sheds light on the serious weaknesses in these countries’ socioeconomic model. The pandemic has had a greater impact on expatriate workers and people with insecure residency status in the Gulf Arab states in terms of health security and food security. As Eckart Woertz explained, ensuring food accessibility for these vulnerable segments of the population is one of the main challenges that governments need to address, along with other responsibilities such as the management of value chains and food diplomacy.⁴¹

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Recent developments make the case for more equitable treatment of the expatriate working class, as the economic model of the Gulf Arab states appears unsustainable in the event of a drastic reduction in the number of non-nationals. And this realization seems to have made its way to decision-making circles. Qatar modified its labor laws in August, raising the minimum wage by 25% and scrapping a requirement for workers to get permission from their employers

³⁸ Afshin Molavi, “Economic Contraction Across the Gulf Chokes the Flow of Remittances to South Asia,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, May 26, 2020.

³⁹ Ole Waever, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup, and Pierre Lemaitre, *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe* (London: Pinter, 1993), 23. The term was first used in 1991 (Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fears*, op. cit.) as one of the five sectors in which the state could be threatened. Ole Waever later proposed a reconceptualization of this theory: While staying one sector of state security, it could be understood as its own referent object of security. Whereas state security is concerned about threats to its sovereignty, societal security is concerned about threats to a society’s identity.

⁴⁰ “Gulf Societies in Transition: National Identity and National Projects in the Arab Gulf States,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 10, 2016.

⁴¹ Eckart Woertz, “Wither the Self-Sufficiency Illusion? Food Security in Arab Gulf States and the Impact of COVID-19,” *Food Security* 12, no. 4 (August 2020): 757-60.

to change jobs, pointed to by Amnesty International as “a step in the right direction.”⁴² Saudi Arabia also announced reforms in November to abolish restrictions that have tied millions of low-paid and vulnerable or abused migrant workers to their employers.⁴³ However, as noted by Hiba Zayadin, a Human Rights Watch researcher, “Nationals make triple the minimum wage of migrants.”⁴⁴ These continued social inequalities are linked to policymakers still perceiving migrant workers as “a potential threat to Gulf polities, should they make any claims to civil or political rights in the future.”⁴⁵ They thus try to address human insecurities only to the extent necessary to maintain stability, without disrupting their fundamental economic model, in a way that is consistent with their regime-centric approaches.

State-Centric Approaches

For the past 10 years, in the wake of the international financial crisis and the Arab Spring uprisings, Gulf leaders have been proactive in deploying strategies focused on the advancement of their country's (or their own) interests, sometimes in competition with their neighbors,⁴⁶ often favoring political agendas to the detriment of human-focused considerations. For example, the GCC rift that began in June 2017 is linked to concerns rooted in the political dimension of security and has taken a toll on the populations (mainly because of the strict suspension of mobility between Qatar and neighboring Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain) and the economies of the countries involved in it.⁴⁷ The year's events are an additional incentive for all the Gulf Arab

For the most part, Gulf leaders have tried to tackle many human security challenges without reevaluating their threat and policy priorities.

states to address the “incongruities that can arise from the over-prioritization of the interests and ambitions of leaders to the detriment of what constitutes the national interest, which necessarily has human and societal components.”⁴⁸

For the most part, Gulf leaders have tried to tackle many human security challenges without reevaluating their threat and policy priorities. While they clearly placed educational reforms at the center of their ambitious economic diversification projects, budget allocations for education have remained much smaller than military expenditures, although there is an obvious cost differential. More important, there are still opportunities to better align their education and training systems with the requirements of their development plans and labor markets. The limits of the steps taken by Gulf governments are illustrated by the unchanged

⁴² “Qatar Raises Minimum Wage, Lifts Curbs on Changing Jobs,” *Reuters*, August 30, 2020; “Qatar: New Laws To Protect Migrant Workers are a Step in the Right Direction,” *Amnesty International*, August 30, 2020.

⁴³ Aya Batrawy, “Saudi Arabia To Remove Key Restrictions on Migrant Laborers,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2020.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Tara Kavalier, “Gulf States Undertake Labor-Law Reforms,” *The Media Line*, September 3, 2020.

⁴⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Internal and External Security in the Arab Gulf States,” *Middle East Policy* XVI, no. 2 (Summer 2009) 39-58.

⁴⁶ Emma Soubrier, “Global and Regional Crises, Empowered Gulf Rivals, and the Evolving Paradigm of Regional Security,” *POMEPS Studies* 34 (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, March 2019): 63-66.

⁴⁷ Emma Soubrier, “The Gulf Crisis: A Case for Rethinking the Gulf Region Security Paradigm,” in *The Dilemma of Security & Defense in the Gulf Region*, ed. Khalid Al-Jaber and Dania Thafer (Washington, DC: Gulf International Forum, 2019): 57-73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

unemployment rates in Gulf countries as they try to increasingly nationalize their workforces without creating more incentives for their populations to work in the private sector. In a February report, the United Nations assessed that technical and vocational education and training could be a gateway to build a skilled youth workforce, but it remains unpopular because students continue to prefer academic education as well as public sector careers.⁴⁹ In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, between 66% and 93% of nationals work in the public sector, a function of the rentier dynamics these countries have relied upon for their political stability. One way to rebalance their labor markets could be to undertake salary reforms to put the private sector on a more equal footing with the public sector, which could motivate more citizens to opt for the former. However, the political risk entailed in a shift away from the long-term job security offered by government employment might be perceived as too high for leaders to move in this direction, despite the advantages it would otherwise present for these countries' economic vitality.

2020 could mark a turning point to a much-needed reorganization of approaches to Gulf security, even if the end game remains regime security by strengthening the internal cohesion of Gulf polities.

The Gulf Arab states' strategic choices have continuously illustrated their emphasis on the traditional dimensions of their security (related mostly to the political and military sectors). Yet, the current proliferation of human security challenges shows that this is not a comprehensive approach to Gulf security. Thus, 2020 could mark a turning point to a much-needed reorganization of approaches to Gulf security, even if the end game remains regime security by strengthening the internal cohesion of Gulf polities. Indeed, as underlined by Kristian Ulrichsen, "What is vital to securing the sustainable long-term development of these polities is expansion of their support base and reconciliation of regime security with human security for all."⁵⁰

The Way Forward

Redefining National Security

In a July policy brief on the Arab region, the United Nations underlined that "The COVID-19 crisis has exposed critical under-investment in health and social protections in many countries, and this region is no exception. Meanwhile, the imports of arms by countries in the Middle East increased by 61 per cent between 2010–2014 and 2015–2019, constituting 35 per cent of total global arms imports over the past five years."⁵¹ The brief suggested that these billions of dollars could be better invested and specifically pointed out: "Switching expenditures from

⁴⁹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, *Reforming Technical and Vocational Education and Training: A Gateway for Building a Skilled Youth Workforce in the Arab Region* (Beirut: United Nations, February 2020).

⁵⁰ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Internal and External Security in the Arab Gulf States," *Middle East Policy* XVI, no. 2 (Summer 2009) 39–58.

⁵¹ "The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity To Build Back Better," *United Nations*, July 2020, 21.

fossil fuel subsidies and military spending could release substantial resources, which would contribute not only to human capital, but also to renewing a frayed social contract, caused in part by a lack of social and economic mobility.”⁵²

The first step might be to redefine what “national security” means. Bridging all aspects of security and recognizing how intermingled they are could indeed allow for an incremental reassessment of priorities. In the Gulf, defense and security budgets could remain high but be used for human-focused national security priorities. The idea to adopt a more inclusive definition of security is not new: Arguing that vulnerabilities brought by environmental change could endanger the security of countries and the welfare of whole populations, Jessica Tuchman Mathews issued a call in 1989 to “redefine security” by broadening the definition of “national security to include resource, environmental and demographic issues.”⁵³

Going forward, Gulf leaders could officially restructure their discourse on security as a basis for an increased allocation of resources to counter soaring risks pertaining to public health, food, water, and environmental security. In fact, this reorganization may have already started. The defense company Strata, which used to make airplane parts, was transformed to manufacture N95 masks to stop the spread of the coronavirus, and there has been a proliferation of articles on food and water security in Gulf media.

This apparent shift might dissipate after the current crisis, yet some changes suggest it could become institutionalized. In the UAE, for instance, a review of the government structure was announced in July, and the ministerial reshuffle pointed to the identification of economic planning

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as well as food and water security as rising priorities. New ministries emerged, including the Ministry of Industry and Advanced Technology tasked with developing the country’s industrial sector. Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, UAE vice president and prime minister and ruler of Dubai, notably stated that “Food security will remain a priority through two ministers ... The Minister of State for Food and Water Security to follow up on our national food stock and invest in food technology and international relations in this field ... and the Minister of Environment in supporting farmers and caring for and developing our fish and animal wealth.”⁵⁴

The one human security challenge that has trailed behind is perhaps the issue of climate change. And while the economic transformation that could come with the implementation of measures linked to other human-focused concerns might bring positive collateral change in this area too, Mari Luomi has noted that climate change should be treated as a strategic priority in its own right.⁵⁵

⁵² “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity To Build Back Better,” *United Nations*, July 2020, 25.

⁵³ Jessica Tuchman Mathews, “Redefining Security,” *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1989): 162-77, cited in Mai Mahmoud, “Water at the Nexus of Gulf Security and Growth Challenges,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 12, 2016.

⁵⁴ “President Approves New Structure of UAE Government,” *Emirates News Agency*, July 5, 2020.

⁵⁵ Mari Luomi, “Gulf States’ Climate Change Policies Amid a Global Pandemic,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, September 25, 2020.

Investing in New Technologies

After establishing the salience and immediacy of addressing these human security challenges, one strategy might be to invest some of the repackaged defense and security budgets in new technologies that could help tackle some of these issues while also addressing economic diversification.

Some of the Gulf Arab states have already started demonstrating the high potential of new technologies in these respects. For instance, several countries have turned to agricultural technology to strengthen their food security. In the UAE, the Abu Dhabi Investment Office announced in April a \$100 million investment in four agricultural technology firms to build research and development facilities in the emirate, with the U.S.-based AeroFarms expressing its will to build “the biggest vertical farm of its kind in the world -- in which crops are grown in layers -- with the first harvest by mid-2021.”⁵⁶ The funding was dispersed as part of the Abu Dhabi Investment Office’s larger AgTech Incentive Programme, worth \$272 million, to “advance the emirate’s agricultural technologies,

capabilities and leadership.”⁵⁷ Also aiming to tackle food security challenges, Kuwait’s Wafra International Investment

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Company invested \$100 million in the UAE-based start-up Pure Harvest Smart Farms.⁵⁸ More broadly, as stressed by Ayman Sejiny, CEO of the Islamic Development Bank in Saudi Arabia, “If we want to confront climate change and feed the growing world population, we must invest in science, technology and innovation.”⁵⁹ Despite concerns based on the UAE’s experience regarding increased risk of flooding, Riyadh is also following in Abu Dhabi’s footsteps in using technology to literally make it rain, as the Saudi Cabinet approved a cloud-seeding program in February to increase rainfall in the kingdom by almost 20%.⁶⁰

The innovative use of technology and digital connectivity in the Gulf Arab states’ response to the pandemic has received international praise, with examples such as “smart helmets capable of scanning temperatures of hundreds of people every minute” in the UAE and “multilingual robots on isolation wards to check body temperatures, administer medicine, serve meals and sterilize treatment rooms” in Bahrain.⁶¹ At the same time, their coronavirus response, in particular their use of contact tracing, raised important questions pertaining to citizen tracking, data collection, and state surveillance.⁶² These investments in new technologies could be used to consolidate previously established state-centric (or regime-centric) approaches instead of a

⁵⁶ Sylvia Westall and Layan Odeh, “Virus, Expats and Ramadan Stress Test Food Security in Gulf,” *Bloomberg*, April 15, 2020.

⁵⁷ Jessica Pothering, “Amid Covid-19, the Gulf Region Commits \$200m To Safeguard Its Food Security With Agtech,” *AgFunderNews*, April 15, 2020.

⁵⁸ Gavin Gibbon, “Pure Harvest To Build \$35m Farm in Kuwait Amid Coronavirus Food Security Concerns,” *Arabian Business*, September 9, 2020.

⁵⁹ Caline Malek, “How GCC Countries are Forging a Food-Secure Future,” *Arab News*, January 1, 2020.

⁶⁰ Caline Malek, “Saudi Arabia Throws Its Support Behind Cloud-Seeding Technology,” *Arab News*, February 19, 2020.

⁶¹ Caline Malek, “High COVID-19 Recovery Rates Put GCC Region in the Limelight,” *Arab News*, September 13, 2020.

⁶² Emma Soubrier, “UAE Security Apparatus Central to Its Pandemic Response,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, July 7, 2020.

shift toward human-focused security. And while the Abraham Accords, intended to normalize relations between the UAE and Israel, have prompted commentary on the intention of the United States to sell the UAE F-35 fighter jets and other topics connected to traditional military aspects of security, policymakers from the region have mostly focused on the opening of new avenues of cooperation on agricultural technology and tackling public health challenges. Going forward, Gulf countries could build new cooperation patterns around reprioritized human aspects of security.

Conclusion: Building New Cooperation Patterns

An amplified focus on human security challenges could lead to fresh cooperation between the Gulf Arab states and numerous partners, injecting renewed – and renewable – energy into previously established partnerships, in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond. Green Gulf megaprojects have, for instance, been launched with the support of European and Asian partners. The first Saudi wind farm – which will be the largest in the Middle East upon completion in 2022 – is being developed by a consortium led by France’s EDF Renewables and UAE-based renewable firm Masdar. In January, France’s Total and Japan’s Marubeni also committed to develop Qatar’s first large-scale solar independent power plant.⁶³ Signs of greener cooperation with Middle Eastern partners include a UAE investment in Egypt to produce 500 megawatts of electricity from a wind farm in the Gulf of Suez.⁶⁴ There has also been a notable increase in cooperation with China on health technologies and associated artificial intelligence projects, which have been central to the UAE’s pandemic response.⁶⁵

An increase in these types of cooperative projects with traditional and new partners alike could not only help them tackle environmental security and sustainability concerns, but they could also create synergies addressing several security dimensions at once. In this respect, they could further investigate the development of next generation farming without soil and with little water (aeroponics systems), a prospect that sits at the crossroads of food and water security as well as ecological concerns. They could also look into the technology aspects of initiatives such as the idea of “greening the military,” (at the crossroads of environmental, economic, and military dimensions of security) or even lead the way in transitioning from arms to renewables. This idea would require repurposing highly skilled manufacturing jobs from a defense industry that is “flatlining at best” toward equally high-skilled and more sustainable jobs in the clean energy sector.⁶⁶ The UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of which have started developing defense industrial bases, could be particularly interested in such opportunities, which would place them at the forefront of innovative solutions for the future.

⁶³ Michelle Meineke, “GCC Plays Catch-Up With Green Megaprojects,” *Petroleum Economist*, August 26, 2020.

⁶⁴ Jean Marie Takouleu, “EGYPT: UAE Investors Obtain Land for 500 MW Wind Farm,” *Afrik21*, October 2, 2020.

⁶⁵ Simeon Kerr, “UAE Caught Between US and China as Powers Vie for Influence in Gulf,” *Financial Times*, June 2, 2020.

⁶⁶ “Arms to Renewables,” Campaign Against Arms Trade, March 31, 2020. The Campaign Against Arms Trade did extensive research on the topic, see Ian Prichard, “Arms to Renewables: Work for the Future,” *Campaign Against Arms Trade*, October 2015. These ideas have been put into practice in Alabama, for example (Taylor Barnes, “From Arms to Renewables: How Workers in This Southern Military Industrial Hub Are Converting the Economy,” *Common Dreams*, November 1, 2020) and have gained momentum amid the global brainstorming on how to rethink security and draw lessons from the pandemic for a more prepared and better world moving forward.

A heightened prioritization of human security could also lead to renewed cooperation among the Gulf states themselves, in a way that could help mend intra-Gulf ties. In this respect, the July U.N. policy brief noted that “the response to the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for reconciliation and lasting peace and security. With notions of security expanding to integrate health security, regional collaboration becomes all the more critical.”⁶⁷

To be sure, a number of GCC meetings were held with the virtual participation of all member states (ministers of finance, commerce, and interior) in March and April, in an effort to identify coronavirus countermeasures. In April, the GCC also adopted a Kuwaiti proposal to create

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a joint food supply network across the peninsula, agreeing to set up special arrangements at border control and customs posts, to facilitate the movement of basic food and medical supplies among the six member states.⁶⁸ Confronted with common challenges that ignore borders and geopolitical differences, the GCC countries could thus find their way back to one another and seek collective solutions that would make them stronger in the face of adversity. Ultimately, at the regional and international levels, there is a choice to be made between short-sighted decisions focused on personal political or nationalist geopolitical gain and initiatives that transcend adversarial politics, anchored in concern for populations’ well-being in the long run.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity To Build Back Better,” *United Nations*, July 2020, 4.

⁶⁸ “How Covid-19 is Honing Kuwait’s Focus on Food Security,” *Oxford Business Group*, May 4, 2020.

⁶⁹ Emma Soubrier, “Ego-balization versus Eco-operation: Prioritizing Human Security in the Face of Global Crises,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 31, 2020.

