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Navigating Area Studies in the Arab Gulf: Challenges and Prospects

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Introduction

The waning influence of traditional orientalist perspectives and a burgeoning interest in exploring the developing world paved the way for a new methodological approach known as area studies by the end of the second world war (Rafael, 1994). Despite its Western origins, area studies is a potent tool for knowledge production. It possesses a unique advantage over social sciences discipline in terms of depth and diversity which traditional disciplines fail to capture in isolation. Area studies excels in placing a region within its distinctive socio-cultural, economic, and political context, thereby engendering a nuanced body of knowledge that acknowledges and accommodates specificity.

Prominent universities in the Western countries often house multiple area studies centers that produce extensive research on various global regions, including the Middle East. Nonetheless, a persistent challenge persists in the form of a tendency toward "otherization." On the contrary, the efforts of scholars from the Arab Gulf region to conduct in-depth studies of the Arab world and other global regions have not gained the same traction as research centers located in Western institutions. Consequently, knowledge production in the field of area studies within the Gulf region remains at the margins at best (Altorki, 2013; Almansour, 2015).

Nonetheless, there has been remarkable progress in the field of natural sciences research. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are making efforts to enhance their educational infrastructure. Significant investments in the education sector have led to the creation of educational hubs hosting esteemed branches of Western universities, research centers, and business schools, along with a noticeable rise in international student mobility to the region (Umar & Rahman, 2023). Prominent examples include Education City in Qatar, Dubai Knowledge Park, and King Abdullah Economic City in

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Saudi Arabia, among others (MEED, 2010). Despite the concerted effort to shift from oil-based economies to knowledge-based ones, where knowledge production and the use of information and technology are central to wealth creation and economic growth, academic research output, especially in the field of area studies, is lacking in the GCC countries (PWC, 2019). This challenge is compounded by a prevailing misconception about the nature of area studies—a misconception stemming from the narrow focus of existing area studies research centers on the Gulf region itself. This misperception obscures the fact that area studies primarily serve as a tool for studying regions beyond one's own, emphasizing the need for a broader perspective in approaching research and knowledge production.

This paper is structured into four primary sections to comprehensively explore the landscape of area studies in the Gulf. The initial section provides a concise conceptualization of area studies, establishing a foundational understanding. The subsequent section delves into the historical evolution and status of area studies research in the region, shedding light on its development and existing challenges.

The third section scrutinize the multifaceted factors that have impacted the trajectory of research in the Gulf, including issues of sensitivity, trust, and lack of familiarity with the region. Through this analysis, this paper aims to rekindle the discourse surrounding area studies in the Gulf, emphasizing the pressing need for the establishment of additional area studies programs and research centers in the region. In the last section, the paper offers policy recommendation.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to provoke thoughtful reflection and action, underlining the imperative of strengthening area studies within the Gulf to foster a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the region and beyond.

Conceptualizing Area Studies

The fundamental premise that underpins the conceptualization of area studies is the recognition that no two societies are identical. Put simply, every human group shows distinct behavior shaped by its unique context and cultures, making societies inherently diverse (Ludden, 2003). This distinctiveness necessitates a comprehensive examination of each society within its socio-political, economic, and historical context. The

effectiveness of such a study hinges on an approach that harnesses all available tools for knowledge production and data collection. Area studies employs an interdisciplinary approach that enables researchers to develop a holistic understanding. This approach closely aligns with the research methods used by ethnographers, as researchers must not only possess knowledge of the area but also physically immerse themselves in it during the research process. Therefore, an area studies expert, in addition to possessing a profound understanding of a region's politics, must also possess familiarity with its language, literature, and history (Bates, 1997).

Area Studies in the Gulf

The present condition of area studies in the Gulf region is, at best, a cause for concern. This assertion is grounded in the fact that the Gulf, despite being the economic powerhouse of the Arab world, has a poor track record in knowledge production, and it remains one of the least studied regions globally (Almansour, 2015; Altorki, 2013; Al-Ubaydli, 2020). While there have been numerous studies conducted on the region historically, the nature of those research was often imperialistic in its approach (Onley & Nonneman, 2020). The discovery of oil in the early 20th century further drew Western attention to the Gulf. An archeological enthusiast, Wandell Phillips, began archeological expeditions and published his findings in the world's first book series on the region (Onley & Nonneman, 2020). The popularity of archeological works and the discovery of oil brought the history and heritage of the region in the spot light, ultimately leading to the establishment of few Gulf studies departments such as Yemen Center for Studies and Research (YCSR) in 1972, Centre for Arab Gulf Studies at the University of Basra in 1974 which also was home to one of the oldest Arabic journals on Gulf, *Majallat al-Khalij al-'Arabī* (Arab Gulf Journal), and the Documents and Research Department at the Amiri Diwan in Qatar (Onley & Nonneman, 2020). Majority of these centers were administered and managed by Western scholars.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that the local scholars did not make any effort to produce knowledge. There were number of historical works in Arabic or Persian language. Notable scholars, active in the 19th century, who primarily studied the region's history were Abdul-Rahman Al-Khayri, Khalid Al-Bassam, Mahmoud Al-Alusi, Othman Al-

Basri, Uthman Ibn Bishr, Husain Ibn Ghannam, and Humayd Ibn Ruzayq etc (Onley & Nonneman, 2020). These works have their limitations since not all of them are translated to English, thus limiting their audience to Arabic speaking readers.

Nonetheless, in the past few decades, GCC countries have established universities and research centers. Kuwait set up a university in 1966, followed by UAE University ten years later in 1976. Qatar opened its first national university, Qatar University, in 1977. However, the focus of these institutions was on the STEM fields, including engineering, agriculture, medicine, and public health. It was not until the 1990s where universities began to shift their focus to humanities and social sciences departments. Kuwait University established the Department of Political Sciences in 1998. The Gulf Studies Center at the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Qatar University was initiated almost a decade later in 2011. King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia inaugurated the College of Arts in 2010. Despite this momentum, the number of research centers (university or non-university based) barely touches double digits in contrast to many other non-Gulf Arab countries (ASSM, 2020).

Evidently, current educational investment programs in the Gulf region reflect a significant trend towards prioritizing professional degree programs. Most of the GCC countries have increased funding in their educational sectors, often drawing in international university branches. Notably, these branches predominantly originate in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. While these institutions undeniably provide valuable educational opportunities, their offerings are primarily centered around natural sciences, entrepreneurship, and a limited selection of social science disciplines. For instance, in Qatar, the Qatar Foundation has established Education City, an educational enclave housing seven international university campuses. However, it is crucial to note that only two universities, Georgetown University in Qatar (GUQ) and Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQ), primarily emphasize humanities. Similarly, the University of Calgary in Qatar exclusively offers undergraduate and graduate programs in Nursing. Likewise, the University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST), formerly known as the College of North Atlantic Qatar, primarily serves students pursuing degrees in engineering and related fields. Additionally, Qatar

University predominantly focuses on STEM fields, excelling particularly in areas such as Law, Medicine, Health Sciences, and Business.

The situation in the UAE is not dissimilar, as the country aspires to establish itself as an innovation hub in the region. Impressively, the UAE allocates 3.1% of its total GDP to the educational sector (Umar & Rahman, 2023). This investment aims to enhance the quality of local institutions and manage two flagship knowledge hubs, Dubai National Park and Dubai International Academic Park. Given the prevailing emphasis on natural sciences and business fields, it comes as no surprise that most universities in these complexes do not consider area studies research as their priority. Dubai Knowledge Park hosts four prestigious international university branches. These institutions offer programs primarily in Business Management or Science at both undergraduate and graduate levels, with University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD), being an exception, offering a graduate program in International Relations. Similarly, Dubai International Education City, commonly referred to as Dubai Academic City, hosts approximately seven international university branches, most of which concentrate on business and technology programs. This trend extends to universities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman as well. These countries also prioritize science and business disciplines in their educational programs, aligning with the broader regional focus on these fields. Consequently, area studies research is predominantly relegated to the social sciences departments within Gulf region universities.

A noteworthy aspect of this landscape is that most of the researchers engaged in this field are expatriates, which often results in a research output that leans towards a Western perspective. This orientation is exacerbated by a reliance on theoretical models originally conceived in and tailored for Western societies. Soraya Altorki (2013) highlights several pressing issues that have afflicted social scientific research across Gulf regions. She posits that within Gulf universities, a host of challenges persist. These include repetitiveness, redundancy, synthesis, and methodological narrowness, which overshadow analytical focus, theoretical rigor, methodological sophistication, and pedagogical advancement. While area studies centers in the Gulf are gradually beginning to embark on independent research endeavors, they have yet to manifest a significant increase in sophistication and comprehensive understanding among scholars, both in

terms of instruction and research. It is clear that Gulf state universities have not fully embraced these evolving trends. Sahar et al., (2023) contend that despite the substantial wealth of the Gulf states, research productivity in the region, whether in the realm of social sciences or Gulf studies, remains modest. Addressing this challenge necessitates a concerted effort to bolster academic and research capacities. Unfortunately, the quantity and quality of research originating from the GCC region remain subpar, even in light of increased investments in research infrastructure. The obstacles at play encompass limited PhD programs, a dearth of collaborative platforms, sparse research partnerships with both the public and private sectors, and minimal influence on policy development.

Factors Impacting Area Studies Research in Gulf

Several factors have profoundly shaped the course of area studies research in the Gulf region. First and foremost, the rapid development triggered by the discovery of oil necessitated an academic culture which prioritized academic programs designed to cultivate a technologically proficient local workforce capable of driving forward the ambitious economic and infrastructural developmental projects. This emphasis on skilled local talent served as a means for GCC countries to reduce their dependence on high-skilled migrant workers. Developing a skilled local workforce, constituted of citizens, allows GCC states to place their own citizens at various managerial and technical occupations, thus reducing their reliance on foreign nationals.

The second factor, closely intertwined with the first, revolves around the perceived outcomes of area studies research. In contrast to the professional degree programs, area studies research does not yield immediate, tangible benefits. When subjected to a cost-benefit analysis, area studies research often lags behind natural sciences and applied research in terms of providing a clear return on investment. Given the imperative of ongoing development in GCC countries, research that offers immediate practical advantages to the nation is prioritized. Consequently, natural science research centers tend to secure more substantial funding compared to their counterparts in area studies. This dearth of funding has impeded the development of robust research centers in the field.

Third, the imperial legacy of area studies has generated skepticism among the GCC societies. Critics have argued that its flourishing during the Cold war period suggest that United States developed area studies for its state interests (Kolluoglu-Kirli, 2003; Rafael, 1994; Samiei, 2010). While orientalist often depicted the non-Western world as a homogenous entity, area studies emerged with the promise of liberating scholarship from sweeping generalizations. Nevertheless, despite its intention to embrace the nuances of diverse societies, area studies found itself trapped in the perception of being a Western-driven endeavor.

This perception is further exacerbated by a common misunderstanding of the purpose of area studies in the Gulf. In many instances, area studies research in the Gulf is primarily concentrated on studying the region itself. This narrow focus has led to the misconception that area studies projects are merely tools of foreign powers aimed at scrutinizing the region. However, this perspective overlooks a crucial fact: most major powers establish area studies programs with a primary emphasis on the study of regions other than their own.

Fourth, Gulf society exhibits a reluctance to engage with sensitive issues, a characteristic that significantly impacts the trajectory of area studies research. Area studies predominantly delve into a region's culture, history, and politics, all of which inherently carry elements of sensitivity to a certain extent. While discussions on such topics might be considered routine in some societies, they can elicit intense backlash in others. Area studies research do not inherently favor one topic over another, nor do they dictate what should or should not be studied. Instead, the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable research areas are defined by the society itself. Naturally, research that dares to confront the sensitivities of a society is likely to encounter resistance. The sociopolitical infrastructure, religious convictions, and traditional values deeply permeate all aspects of life in the region, leading to a general inclination to avoid research touching on sensitive issues.

Fifth factor, closely linked to the sensitivity debate, is the issue of trust. It is well-established that researchers must establish trust with the participants involved in their studies. Without this trust, researchers may find it challenging to access critical information. Therefore, building rapport is a fundamental task for any researcher. In GCC

countries, the majority of researchers in universities and research centers are foreign nationals. In contrast to local researchers, outsiders often encounter difficulties in cultivating trust among participants or gaining access to vital information. Nevertheless, it's important to recognize that area studies research doesn't draw criticism due to an unfounded fear of foreign individuals seeking to study the core aspects of society. There have been instances where researchers harboring hidden agendas have used their findings for political objectives and advancing propaganda against the GCC states. These occurrences have raised significant concerns pertaining to research integrity and the trustworthiness of researchers themselves, thereby introducing an additional layer of complexity to conducting research within the region.

Another pertinent issue is the application of Western methodological frameworks to study the Gulf region often by researchers who possess limited familiarity with the intricacies of the area. The absence of a native perspective has led to misrepresentations and, at times, biased conclusions—a situation that Gulf countries view as criticism against their sociopolitical and cultural values. Some scholars have engaged in research endeavors without fully immersing themselves in the field, leading to conclusions drawn from their research that are frequently detached from the local context and lack a comprehensive understanding of on-the-ground realities. Moreover, there has been a tendency to overlook perspectives that incorporate and appreciate the region's culture, values, and norms.

Policy Measures

Emulating the Model of Gulf Studies Program and Center

To strengthen area studies in the Gulf region, a comprehensive strategy is imperative, addressing the factors that have impeded its growth. Two pivotal initiatives come to the forefront in this regard: leveraging the potential of research centers like the Gulf Studies Program and Center (GSC) in Qatar and boosting financial support. A significant initial step is the transformation of how area studies research is perceived in the region. This involves addressing the negative aspects, particularly those linked to its oriental legacy and its focus on unraveling socio-cultural issues. The value of area studies

is often overshadowed by negative portrayals. Shifting this perspective requires increasing recognition and appreciation for area studies research centers, such as the Gulf Studies Program and Center, for their vital role in advancing regional development through knowledge production. It necessitates acknowledging that area studies research goes beyond academic study; it is a valuable instrument for gaining nuanced insights into society, culture, and global perspectives.

GSC not only nurtures a local cadre of experts but also attracts global talents interested in studying the region. Offering graduate programs such as MA and PhD in Gulf Studies ensures a continuous influx of international students seeking educational and experiential opportunities in the Gulf. Graduates from these programs can subsequently share their insights and experiences, contributing to a more informed and balanced perception. GSC transcends the boundaries of its host country and serves the broader needs of the entire Gulf region. Therefore, there should be a strong emphasis on setting up new centers as well as supporting the existing ones. It will naturally augment research capacity and draw in leading scholars who specialize in the Gulf region.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have frequently faced negative media coverage, leading to the creation of stereotypes and misconceptions about the Gulf and its inhabitants. Effectively harnessing area studies research can be a powerful tool for enhancing the region's global image.

Increase Funding

Once the foundational groundwork is in place, substantial funding becomes imperative. Increased funding will enhance the capabilities of existing research centers and their respective departments, making them more attractive to scholars and students seeking to study the region from within as well as those willing to share their expertise on other regions. Furthermore, expansion in the PhD programs, with research centers reserving a quota for local students, will provide an appealing avenue for aspiring PhD researchers. These research centers can subsequently embark on collaborative research initiatives, establish language and culture training centers, create research chairs, offer

research grants and fellowships, and make long-term commitments to knowledge production.

Most GCC countries have already initiated economic diversification programs with a primary objective of reducing dependence on natural resources. These diversification efforts also aim to attract foreign investments, explore new investment opportunities, establish new partnerships, and identify regions that align with the long-term economic and political interests of GCC countries. The success of these initiatives hinges on cultivating a workforce with specialized knowledge.

Conclusion

The examination of the history and present state of area studies research in the Gulf underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how this field is perceived and pursued. Historically rooted in the endeavors of European scholars under colonial influences, area studies research in the region has retained an enduring imperial legacy that persists today. The prevalent reliance on Western theoretical frameworks has led to distortions and biased conclusions.

To address these shortcomings and realize the full potential of area studies, a multifaceted approach is essential. This includes the establishment of robust area studies programs that explore the Gulf within its socio-cultural, economic, and political context. Such programs will not only allow scholars to engage with the intricate tapestry of societies but will also facilitate research conducted from a Gulf perspective, incorporating local perspectives and viewpoints into the production of knowledge. Moreover, the scope of area studies in the Gulf should extend beyond the boundaries of home and encompass diverse regions critical to the economic and political interests of GCC countries. Embracing this broader perspective will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate web of global dynamics.

In this transformed landscape, it is envisioned that the appreciation of area studies research will grow significantly, leading to increased funding and recognition of the transformative potential of knowledge acquisition. Ultimately, this shift will empower the Gulf to contribute more meaningfully to the global academic discourse while nurturing a research ecosystem that genuinely reflects its unique identity and perspectives

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