

Information, Peer Comparison, and Social Interdependence:  
Theorizing the Impacts of Covid-19 on Gulf Domestic Politics

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## **Introduction**

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected domestic politics in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states? Analyses of the implications of Coronavirus for the Arab Gulf monarchies have been largely descriptive or prognostic in nature, and, as is commonly the case, they have focused on the international and transnational dimensions of GCC politics, economy, and security. Commentaries have assessed how the crisis has shaped Gulf approaches to foreign relations and cooperation (Fakhro 2020), humanitarian aid (Soubrier 2020b), migrant labor (Cafiero, et al. 2020), food security (Soubrier 2020a), and other challenges. This listing points to a final limitation of extant accounts of Covid-19's effects on Gulf politics: primary concern with the policy reactions and strategies of Gulf rulers, and to a lesser extent the consequences of government decision-making for ordinary people (e.g., Hedges 2020; Matthiesen 2020). Meanwhile, how the Coronavirus pandemic has influenced the views of citizens and residents toward the Gulf state and toward one another, and the precise pathways by which such changes might emanate, are questions that have received far less attention.

This article takes a bottom-up approach to understanding state-society relations in the post-Covid Arab Gulf. It theorizes three layers of impacts of the Coronavirus crisis on internal GCC politics, and then identifies potential causal mechanisms operating at each level. A first and primary layer concerns governance, and revolves around the state's performance in managing the virus outbreak. A secondary level relates to scarcity and inequality, and is linked to the state's handling of economic and social knock-on effects of the pandemic. A tertiary level is connected to peer comparison, and involves GCC states' (lack of) coordination of political responses at the regional or sub-regional level. Thus, the analysis here aims not to diagnose political effects of the crisis visible already, nor to offer predictions, but to consider specific, novel aspects of the Covid-19 phenomenon that may drive changes in political orientations of Gulf citizens and residents.

Several key factors emerge from the investigation as potent catalysts for new political dynamics in the Arab Gulf states. One is the unusual availability and clarity of information about state performance surrounding Covid-19, which stands in stark contrast to the general lack of reliable governance indicators for the authoritarian GCC countries and regimes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region more broadly. Relatedly, another crucial

attribute is the universally-applicable, global nature of the Coronavirus shock, which allows Gulf citizens and residents to make direct comparisons of state performance and policy responses that may reveal a disproportionately negative (or positive) personal or collective outcome. Third, the person-to-person transmission of Covid-19 shatters the traditional social and geographical segregation of Gulf societies, with once-isolated communities—citizens and expatriates, white-collar and blue-collar workers, subjects and rulers—now directly and profoundly impacted by each other’s behavior, preferences, and incentives. Finally, variation in resource endowments and political institutions across the GCC means that an optimal Covid-19 policy response in one country may be impractical or impossible in another, precluding easy regional harmonization and once more inviting individual comparison with relatively advantaged or disadvantaged peers in neighboring states.

### **Gauging Governance in the Face of the Pandemic**

Arguably the most critical determinant of popular orientations toward Gulf governments is the latter’s performance in delivering the public goods, services, and benefits that form the foundation of the rentier state.<sup>1</sup> Recent research argues that it is precisely their ability for effective governance that allows Gulf and other oil-rich states to enjoy high levels of public support despite a lack of political accountability (Mazaheri 2017). Similarly, recent survey-based studies have demonstrated that Gulf citizens consider basic social services like education, healthcare, and even utilities to be the most essential pillars of the so-called “rentier bargain” of financial patronage in return for political passivity, rather than private clientelistic benefits conferred upon individuals (Gengler, et al. 2020).

The exact level of state performance along various dimensions of governance is typically difficult for Gulf citizens and residents to observe and measure, however. The authoritarian character of Gulf political systems limits the availability of objective information about government performance that might be conveyed through free media, civil society associations, or open conversation among individuals. The closed political environment also restricts the availability and accuracy of secondary data on governance

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions are cases such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where popular orientations may be determined by confessional-based solidarity with or opposition to the ruling elite, rather than objective state performance. See Gengler 2015.

commonly collected and publicized by external organizations such as the World Bank, World Economic Forum, and others. Quantitative studies have demonstrated systematic bias in such data caused by the political embeddedness of the elite survey informants upon whose judgments these surveys rely (Shockley, et al. 2018). Indeed, in August 2020 the World Bank publically suspended its high-profile annual *Doing Business* report after discovering “data irregularities” that artificially boosted the ratings of at least four autocratic countries (Zumbrun 2020). Notably, two of the four were the Arab Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Most often, then, ordinary men and women in the GCC must depend on personal observation, anecdotes, hearsay, or mere intuition in assessing the state’s performance in dealing with important societal problems or challenges. Not so with Coronavirus. Easily-digestible statistics reflecting government success in limiting the spread and impact of the virus—numbers of cases, rates of recovery, numbers of deaths—are reported on a near-daily basis by both state-controlled and external sources. In the Gulf, updated Covid-19 indicators are even delivered in real time directly to mobile phones via mandatory social tracking applications. Incentives to underreport cases or otherwise manipulate Covid-19 data are counterbalanced by the expectation of severe domestic and international reputation costs if a government were to be found to have falsified information, whether through potential data leaks or alternative sources such as satellite imagery.

In this way, the pandemic has afforded Gulf citizens and residents an unprecedented ability to assess their leaders’ performance on the basis of readily comprehensible indicators, monitor improvement or deterioration in performance over time, and directly compare performance with that of regional or international peers serving as benchmarks. That Covid-19 poses the same exogenous challenge to leaderships around the world negates many common excuses for GCC governance failures, centered around claims of local exceptionalism, interference by regional adversaries, or Western political conspiracy.

It is clear that this changed dynamic has not escaped the notice of GCC leaders. Despite some early efforts to invoke such fallback explanations,<sup>2</sup> Arab Gulf governments

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<sup>2</sup> For example, many Gulf and other Arab states initially blamed Iran for the spread of Covid-19 to their countries; see Mattheisen 2020. A March 2020 public opinion survey conducted in Kuwait found that one-half of citizens believed that an outside “state” or “power” was deliberately spreading the virus. See <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/958606/26-03-2020-توجهات-الكويتيين-أزمة-فيروس-كورونا>

have mainly focused their attention on convincing domestic and global audiences of their Coronavirus successes. Once chiefly concerned with delegitimizing political opponents, now state-controlled media and hired public relations firms strive to tout governments' public health responses. For instance, in the two months prior to the pandemic, the author received at least five e-mail messages from a Western-oriented advocacy group linked to the Bahraini government, on the subject of Iran's destabilizing foreign policy. By late February, the topic of the newsletters had shifted to Iran's role in spreading Coronavirus throughout the Gulf, before finally settling in March on a positive focus on the Bahraini leadership's own efforts. An illustrative August 2020 message carried the subject, "Bahrain sets new records for test & trace efforts." Clearly, GCC rulers are aware that their Covid-19 performance is not only under immense public scrutiny, but also being judged against a new, significantly more concrete and global standard.

### **Social Competition amid Interdependence**

What began as a public health crisis in Covid-19 has morphed into an all-encompassing disruption to ordinary life in most places around the world. The second-order economic impacts have been particularly severe, but also uneven, in the rentier Arab Gulf. Societal shutdowns have dried up oil demand, air travel, and tourism, starving GCC governments of revenues needed to subsidize citizens and pay the expatriate workforces that dominate most Gulf economies. Having already embarked on a painful process of fiscal austerity and economic transformation in the wake of the 2014 oil price crash (Moshashai, et al. 2020), governments were forced to make still deeper cuts to welfare programs and public sector payrolls due to the pandemic. Consider the wealthiest GCC state, Qatar, where in June 2020 the Finance Ministry directed all state-owned entities to reduce budgets by 30 percent (Foxman 2020). Cuts were mandated to come from expatriate salaries, expatriate jobs, or both. Meanwhile, Qatar and other Gulf states have pledged tens of billions of dollars in aid to banks and other private sector businesses affected Coronavirus-induced slowdown (Young 2020).

Thus, like economic outcomes in GCC societies generally, the financial consequences of Covid-19 have not been borne equally among citizens or between citizens and residents, accentuating persistent inequalities in the distribution of limited oil

and gas revenues. States have been responsive to the economic plight of merchant elites who provide a key pillar of political support for GCC ruling families, even as ordinary citizens stand to see reduced benefits or salaries. Most vulnerable of all are Gulf expatriates workers, who face uncertain job prospects elsewhere on top of existing mobility challenges (Ewers and Shockley 2018), and may have little choice but to accept cutbacks in compensation and perks.

Even if highlighted by post-Covid policy choices, however, such distributive inequities, and their impacts on state-society relations in the Gulf, are not new. The novel effect of Coronavirus at this second layer of analysis instead lies in two factors: the newfound tangibility of group competition over scarce resources, and the newfound interconnectedness of once-separated Gulf social communities *qua* political constituencies. The former mechanism sharpens public discourse over the proper division of resources in society, as well as the underlying bases for allocation, by shifting the question from largely impersonal and elusive discussions over government spending, to concrete questions about who should receive life-altering priority for medical treatment, vaccination, repatriation, and other Covid-related support. The second driver of change stems from the social transmission of Coronavirus, which creates an unprecedented interdependence between Gulf social groupings that have traditionally been isolated from the effects of each others' oft-conflicting values, incentives, and behaviors.

The public health emergency of Covid-19 brought into stark relief a basic tension of the Gulf development model that has long concerned citizens: dependence upon massive populations of foreign workers who at once enable the high level of welfare enjoyed by GCC citizens, but who also carry various negative consequences. Prior to Coronavirus, these downsides were conceived of almost exclusively in vague economic, cultural, and to a lesser extent political terms, with expatriates viewed as dissipating public goods, diluting indigenous cultural identity and values, and potentially spreading harmful outside political ideologies or conflicts (Okruhlik 2011). The more immediate and concrete worry of foreigners as a transmission vector for communicable disease was not widely counted among these vulnerabilities. Foreign workers remain essential in nearly all stages of Arab Gulf states' pandemic responses, but also utilize hospital beds and other

medical resources that might be required by GCC citizens, and may again serve as the very source of virus infections.

This changing cost-benefit calculation was famously expressed by one prominent Kuwaiti actress, who complained of foreign residents in an April 2020 interview, “We are fed up. If we get sick, there are no hospitals (for us). ... Why, if their countries do not want them, should we deal with them?”<sup>3</sup> Later in June, Kuwait’s prime minister echoed popular sentiment in calling for the country to more than halve the number of expatriates, from 70% to 30% (MacDonald 2020). The Kuwaiti parliament has since taken legislative steps in that direction (Gulf Business 2020). Internationally mobile capital and labor underpins GCC economies, but many now view Gulf states’ global orientation as a threat to personal health, economic well-being, and even political stability. Even prior to the pandemic, Gulf citizens expressed reservations about ambitious National Vision plans achievable only on the backs of large foreign populations; the Covid-19 crisis casts additional doubt on the political viability of current post-oil development strategies.

A second and arguably more fundamental cause of changed social and political dynamics, both in the Gulf region and elsewhere, stems from the very nature of Coronavirus itself. The interpersonal transmission of Covid-19 infections permeates the traditional social and geographical segregation of Gulf and other societies (Al-Nakib 2014), tying the fortunes of previously-isolated communities and political constituencies: citizens and non-citizens, expat professionals and low-skill migrants, ordinary people and ruling elites. The extreme diversity of GCC states works in large measure because these and other disparate groups consent to follow the pluralistic principle of ‘live and let live,’ operating on the basis of values, interests, and behaviors that are shared internally but may not—and need not—accord with those of all other segments of society. Covid-19 destroys this physical and social compartmentalization, with the potential to generate discord, resentment, or (for Gulf expats) exit from the country if the actions and preferences of particular groups are seen to negatively affect the safety and livelihoods of others.

Most obviously, failure to observe virus safety protocols in one community—eschewing masks, attending social gatherings, or traveling abroad for leisure—directly and

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in ‘Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al-Fahad triggers uproar with call for expat ban over coronavirus’, *Arab News*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1651251/middle-east>

profoundly impacts the health of all. Other interdependencies, of incentives and values, may be less apparent. High-wage workers may prioritize reducing risk to personal health over resumption of normal economic activity, while low-wage workers who migrated to the Gulf to provide financial support to family abroad may make a different calculation. A community that places a high value on child education may prefer to resume in-person instruction despite the potential for Covid-19 communication, whereas another segment of society possessing different values will prefer a different policy. Cross-group variation in Covid-19 risk factors such as age and health status represents still another source of divergence in preferences. To be sure, one expects that the Covid-19 policy choices of Gulf and other leaderships worldwide are informed in no small way by the personal susceptibility to Coronavirus of those making the decisions.

### **Conclusion: Regional Divergence and Peer Comparison**

The foregoing analysis identifies the act of comparison as a critical driver of state-society and intra-society relations in the post-Covid Gulf: comparison of the state's public health performance versus that of other governments and over time; comparison of individuals' relative priority in receiving medical and other resources in connection with the pandemic; and comparison of one's own Covid-19-relevant behaviors and preferences to those of others in society. A final dimension of comparison operates at the regional level. Differences in GCC resource endowments and political institutions work against regional harmonization of social and economic policies, inviting citizens and residents to compare themselves to relatively advantaged or disadvantaged peers in neighboring states.

Intra-Gulf divergence on important internal policy questions is not without precedent, especially since the 2011 Arab uprisings. Most notably, despite agreeing in 2016 to a GCC-wide value-added tax and other austerity measures to help shore up government finances, several Gulf countries have deferred implementation out of domestic political considerations. This has engendered a 'good cop/bad cop' duality in the Gulf, with half the region pushing ahead with unpopular fiscal reforms requiring financial sacrifices of citizens and residents, while in other states individuals continue to live under the former, more generous economic system (Gengler xxx). Conflicting policies enacted in the wake of Coronavirus have a similar potential to generate public

images of Gulf states—as relatively generous or stingy, compliant with populist demands or aloof from public opinion, and so on—that encourage people to compare their situation with those prevailing in other GCC states.

Indeed, variation in Gulf population sizes and composition, resource revenues, and political institutions means that such policy deviation is likely inevitable. The wealthiest GCC states possess the resources and small citizenries necessary to insulate nationals—both as employees and business owners—from the most harmful effects of Covid-induced economic recession, while poorer governments will be unable to extend the same financial lifelines. Likewise, as considered already, Kuwait’s uniquely efficacious parliament enables populist sentiment to influence policy—for instance, on the question of foreign workers—to an extent not possible in other GCC countries. Were Kuwait to succeed in its aim of halving the non-citizen population, then nationals in other Gulf countries with similar concerns over demographic imbalance may point to the case as a model, and ask why their government cannot do the same. Such questions may touch on policies lying at the very heart of GCC development strategies, offering no easy answers.

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