



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 2

# **Building an Institutional Process of Socio-Politics in the Gulf**

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### **Abstract**

The following workshop tries to reach a better and more balanced understanding of the contemporary process of politics in the Gulf by examining the roles played by both formal and informal institutions at informing and shaping decision-making at a national level. Academic studies have tended to emphasize the role played by elites, tribe, *majalis*, military, rentierism, environment, and external relations in shaping domestic and foreign policy decisions. However, political, social, economic, and cultural institutions also contribute to the wider policy debate and inform the political process. There are very few academic studies that account for the role that institutions, in particular newly-founded institutions, play in advancing the process of politics in the Gulf. The proliferation of official, unofficial, formal, and informal institutions across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) over the past 10 years makes the aim of the workshop both timely and essential for better understanding the complexity of the process of politics in the Gulf. Drawing on the comparative experience of academics and practitioners directly involved with social, political, economic, and cultural institutions in the Gulf, the workshop will analyze the

factors that either currently facilitate or constrain building a process of politics in the region. Academics and practitioners would be drawn from a wide range of institutions with the aim of not only comparing and capturing experiences, but also seeking ways in which to enhance, support, and underpin a more effective way of building an institutional process of politics.

## **Description and Rationale**

### **Background**

GCC governments are often accused of not being transparent in their decision-making. In addition, they are perceived to be unable, or unwilling, to respond to their citizens' needs and aspirations; a situation that is made particularly acute by the demographic reality of the Gulf region. Furthermore, it is sometimes claimed that GCC states create new institutions to accommodate pressures for increased socio-political participation without establishing an alternative to their own rule. Therefore, it is argued that in the absence of "responsive" governance, societies need to develop the ability to build consensus, advocate for their own interests, or partner with both public and private sectors to pursue these interests. This can be achieved by building an effective institutional process that provides entry points for citizen participation in the decision-making process. Indeed, delivery of fair and equitable citizen services requires government responsiveness and accountability, as well as motivated civil society organizations with the know-how to mobilize citizens and effectively engage with government to promote and sustain progress. In short, breakdowns in governance and the lack of effective civic institutions can lead to broader failures, creating the conditions for corruption and unrest.

When examining institutional processes in the Gulf we also need to measure institutional effectiveness, i.e. the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring performance against mission in all aspects of an institution. It is also possible to refer to the theory of "new institutionalism." According to Przeworski (2004) "new institutionalism" consists of two propositions:

- 1) "Institutions matter": they influence norms, beliefs, and actions; therefore, they shape outcomes;
- 2) "Institutions are endogenous": their form and their functioning depend on the conditions under which they emerge and endure.

### **Workshop Goals**

The overall goal of the workshop is to encourage scholars and practitioners to better understand the complexity of decision-making in the Gulf by acquiring a more insightful appreciation of how established and newly-founded institutions contribute to the

policy process. Moreover, the analysis and insights shared among scholars and practitioners will serve to help underpin the institutional process of politics in the region.

In addition, the GCC states often lack an effective intermediate stratum that can operate and liaise between higher echelons of government and the general population. This lack of an effective “bridge” between the governing and governed contributes to societal frustration regarding perceived lack of consultation in relation to socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural participation. One way to address this problem is to build effective institutions that are seen as being accountable to society and not simply as vehicles to “rubber-stamp” governmental decisions.

Therefore, the questions animating this workshop could include:

1. What is it that makes an institution effective?
2. How do institutions resist co-optation and becoming vehicles for high profile public figures?
3. What role can institutions play in creating and/or enhancing: socio-political awareness; national development; civil society; national identity; notions of citizenship; community awareness?
4. What role can institutions play in transforming citizenship awareness into citizenship engagement?
5. How can institutions help governments create the mechanisms to engage citizens in decision-making?
6. What approaches and/or methods can be utilized to strengthen civil society institutions and/or organizations to serve community needs sustainably?
7. How can institutions strengthen government and private sector bodies to collaboratively fight corruption?
8. Across the GCC, how can better coordination between existing institutions be achieved?
9. Within each Gulf state, how can better cooperation between existing institutions be achieved? (Combatting a “silo-mentality”)
10. How can foreign universities/think tanks/research institutes contribute to the building of institutional processes in the Arab Gulf States?
11. How can a fair balance be achieved between traditional and contemporary institutions in the Gulf?
12. What is the influence of language and culture on Gulf institutions?
13. How can conflict be avoided when a state has a presence in two or more national institutions?
14. How can education prepare individuals to play a role in building of institutional processes?

### **Workshop Scope and Proposed Topics**

The following are some proposed themes for the papers, but other relevant topics will also be welcomed. As previously mentioned, it is hoped that the workshop will attract a wide variety of papers from the Gulf area and beyond. Papers presented at the workshop will permit discussion and analysis of ideas and methods that can help facilitate the building of effective institutional socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural processes in the Gulf region. This remains an under-researched area; hence, the workshop's scope will be necessarily broad in order to include contemporary political, economic, social and cultural issues as well as their impact on institutional processes in the Gulf States. Therefore, a variety of perspectives from practitioners and researchers and others are invited. These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- Why Institutions Matter in the Gulf
- Governance and Institution-building
- E-governance and Online Participation
- The Role of Institutions in the Gulf
- The Importance of Political Institutions
- The Importance of Social Institutions and Social Construction in the Gulf
- Institutions as a Fundamental Cause of Long-Run Growth
- Best Practices and Local Leadership
- Public Administration and Development Management
- Strengthening Training Institutions
- Institutions as a Vehicle for Combatting Corruption
- National Identity, Citizenship, and Institutions
- Understanding the Role Played by Foreign Nationals in Institution Building

### **Edited Book**

Another aim of this workshop is to publish an edited book based on the individual papers presented. It is hoped that this volume will fill a gap in the relatively thin literature on institutional processes in the Gulf.

### **Potential Solutions and Recommendations**

We believe this proposed workshop will attract new research that reveals more about building institutional processes in the Gulf. Thus, the workshop will contribute to the expansion of Gulf Studies by bringing together scholars and practitioners with first-hand knowledge and experience from a range of social, political, economic and cultural institutions from the six Gulf countries. It is clear that formal and informal institutions are an integral part of the political process in the Gulf, but there have been very few

academic studies that account for the import of such institutions. The dominant narrative among academic literature rests upon analysis of ruling families and their access to resources, but gives little credence to the presence of institutions in the policy process other than military ones.

## **Anticipated Participants**

We encourage papers from socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural practitioners with Gulf experience (both native and non-native) as well as researchers working in the Gulf field. In addition, the workshop is also open to representatives of NGOs, governments, and think tanks. The papers could be individual, co-authored or small group contributions depending on the topic and/or institution. In sum, the aim of the workshop is to facilitate the sharing of ideas and to contribute to building a body of knowledge on this topic, based on real-life experiences in order to represent the broadest range of perspectives possible. These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

### **Anticipated Papers (Gulf Region):**

- **Case studies**  
Individual state/government policies; examination of public or private sector institutions; cooperation between national and international institutions
- **Empirical studies**  
While the literature often assumes that Gulf institutions do not play a big role in government decision-making and/or policy formation, this might not be the case depending on the activities of specific states, governments, and institutions. Therefore, there is a need for more thorough empirical studies about the role that institutions play (past, present or future aspects) in specific fields as well as individual Gulf states and/or the wider GCC.
- **Successful role models**  
Both proven success stories and unsuccessful ones can demonstrate how institutions can play a role in building a process of politics in the Gulf. Papers could refer to governments, public or private institutions and/or related bodies. While this section strongly encourages case studies, theoretical models are also possible.
- **Methods, approaches and examples of institutional design**

Can institutions be designed in any meaningful sense? As Lowndes and Roberts (2013:171) argue: “If design is emergent rather than planned, this should not lead us to underestimate the importance of intent – as well as accident and evolution – in shaping institutional development.”

- **Analysis of how institutions empower as well as constrain**  
How do institutions distribute power? How is power exercised through regulation, practice and storytelling or a smart mix of these elements? How do institutions constrain actors? How do rule-makers impose their will on rule-takers?
- **Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism**  
What are the dimensions, processes, sources and subjects of legitimation? How can we investigate and comprehend the workings of various sources of legitimacy in Gulf institutions as well as the workings of legitimacy at multiple levels of analysis?

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Dr. Mark C. Thompson** is Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where he has been teaching courses in International Relations and Globalization since 2012. In addition, he is involved in establishing a new Master’s program in Energy and Society at KFUPM. He also runs his own consultancy business that offers an objective perspective of contemporary Saudi socio-political issues. Dr. Thompson has taught at multiple tertiary educational institutions in the UK, Asia and across the Arab world. In addition, he has lived and worked intermittently in Saudi Arabia since 2001 for diverse institutions such as Saudi Arabian Airlines, the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and Aramco. Dr. Thompson holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies, University of Exeter where he also taught a course on Political Reform in the Gulf. His principal research areas are Saudi socio-political development and societal transformation and he has published on topics such as Saudi youth issues and challenges facing Saudi women leaders. He recently published a book with I.B. Tauris “Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change: National Dialogue and Civil Society” and is currently working on another book about societal issues and change from the perspective of young Saudi men.

**Dr. Neil Quilliam** is a Senior Consulting Fellow at Chatham House, where he leads the GCC Future Trends project and Syria and Its Neighbours Policy Initiative. He also serves as Senior Advisor to the Rapidan Group – a D.C.-based energy consultancy. He served as Senior Energy Advisor to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London for

four years. In this capacity, he advised the FCO and other Whitehall ministries, including the Cabinet Office, Department of Energy & Climate Change, Ministry of Defence, Her Majesty's Treasury, and UK Trade & Industry. Prior to working with the UK government, Dr. Quilliam led Control Risks' Middle East and North Africa practice and advised governments and multinationals, including IOCs, on political risk. He has lived and worked extensively in the Middle East throughout his career, having taught at the United Nations University in Amman, Jordan; Jordan Institute of Diplomacy, Amman; King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools in Bethlehem. Neil holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from Durham University (UK) and wrote his thesis on "Syria and the New World Order." He has published several books on Syria and contributed many chapters in edited volumes on Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the Gulf Co-operation Council.

## Selected Readings

Publications examining the roles played by both formal and informal institutions in the Gulf regions are somewhat few, but the following list provides some background to the topic.

- Acemoglu, D. & J. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. London: Profile Books, 2012.
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- Greenwood, R. et al. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2008.
- Jones, D. and R. Punshi. *Unlocking the Paradox of Plenty: A Review of the Talent Landscape in the Arab world and Your Role in Shaping the Future*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2013.
- Halla, B. *Leading Nowhere: Do Institutions Matter or Not?* [Online], 2013. Available from: <http://harvardpolitics.com/books-arts/leading-nowhere-do-institutions-matter-or-not/>.
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- UNDP. *Arab Development Challenges Report 2011*, [Online], 2012. Available from: [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/UNDP-ADCR\\_En-2012.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/UNDP-ADCR_En-2012.pdf).
- VeneKlasen, L. and V. Miller. *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*. Herndon: Stylus Publishing, 2002.
- Weber, M. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Free Press, 1947.