The International Politics of the Persian Gulf

A cultural genealogy

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam
The International Politics of the Persian Gulf

The International Politics of the Persian Gulf examines the causes and consequences of conflict in one of the most important regions of the world. Bridging the gap between critical theories of international relations and the empirical study of the Gulf area, this book expands on the many ideologies, cultural inventions and ideational constructs that have affected relations in the past three decades.

Issues explored include:

- The rise and fall of Arab and Persian nationalism
- The international repercussions of the Islamic revolution in Iran
- The events surrounding the three Gulf Wars
- The 'mindset' of terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda
- Why US neo-conservatism is threatening regional order.

Confronting mainstream discussions of the region written in the 'realist' tradition, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam presents what he terms 'a cultural genealogy of anarchy', analysing the permeation, throughout the Gulf area, of values and beliefs constitutive of the problematic nature of regional relations.

Provocatively written, persuasively researched and conclusively argued, The International Politics of the Persian Gulf presents the first comprehensive analysis of international relations in the Gulf from an explicitly multidisciplinary perspective.

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam received a Diploma in Political Science from the University of Hamburg and an MPhil and PhD from the University of Cambridge. In October 2005, he was elected to the Jarvis Doctorow Junior Research Fellowship at St Edmund Hall and the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford.
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   A cultural genealogy
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The International Politics of the Persian Gulf
A cultural genealogy

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam
To my parents Mahmoud and Mehranguiz Adib-Moghaddam
The change in the balance of power in the instinctual dynamic in favour of destructive energy may again be a turning point in history. The universe of violence in which we live today is no longer the universe of violence which is identical with the history of mankind. The universe of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, of Hiroshima and Vietnam, of torture and over-kill as conventional techniques in international relations is no longer the historical universe of violence.

(Herbert Marcuse, *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*)
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Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

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Introduction

In the past few years there has emerged a new and salutary interest in the critical study of culture, an interest that has also ameliorated the study of international politics. Yet despite a recent growth of critical theoretical work in both disciplines, scholars of International Relations and Middle Eastern studies remain generally uncomfortable reverting to cultural concepts to understand the causes of international conflict, particularly with regard to the area under focus here. As a consequence, the idea that identity, norms, institutions and other cultural artefacts shape international politics in the Persian Gulf has remained marginalised.

This book attempts to synthesise the critical study of culture with empirical analysis of conflict in the Persian Gulf. It takes anarchy to be constituted in a cultural context where different constructions of identities engage, compete and sometimes clash with each other. It will become clear that both history and our method privilege interaction between the three main protagonists – Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia – but our analysis is not meant to exclude the other littoral states, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait. Some might argue that the subject is too large or too small: that ‘region’ is in itself a problematic abstraction or that the international politics of the Persian Gulf cannot be satisfactorily analysed in isolation from the ‘Middle East’. I understand that there are contending definitions of what constitutes ‘region’, and to make a case for analytical autonomy of the Persian Gulf does not mean that there is no interconnectedness between this part of the world and Palestine/Israel, North Africa, Central Asia or other areas. It will become clear that during some periods and political developments I will go beyond the analytic delineation, for instance when the Second Persian Gulf War or competing ideological narratives in the Islamic worlds are discussed. I argue, however, that it would be misleading to subsume constitutive events such as the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Iran–Iraq war and even the Iraq–Kuwait crisis under a ‘Middle Eastern’ meta-narrative, just because analysis of the Persian Gulf is not departmentalised and institutionalised or because political rhetoric and media representation suggest abstraction from the particular in favour of the general. It is my proposal that for the purpose of this study it is sufficient and necessary to discuss the international politics of the Persian Gulf without explicitly positioning the analytical focus within a wider ‘Middle Eastern’ discourse. A line has to be drawn somewhere and this is where I choose to draw it, partly because of the limits of my own knowledge.
Since the sub-title of this book, ‘a cultural genealogy’, requires some explanation, Chapter 1 elaborates on my understanding of critical genealogical analysis. The issues here are taken from critical theories and social ‘constructivist’ ideas and are discussed in relation to the discipline of International Relations (IR). Hence, some terminology might be unfamiliar to area scholars. However, an effort has been made to simplify theoretical language as far as possible. I cannot really say that what follows is ‘simple language’, but the measure of clarity has become for me an important demand of this study. The second and subsequent chapters form a dialectical analysis of constitutive events in the Persian Gulf. Selecting deductively from empirical studies on the area and drawing inductively on sociological, anthropological, psychological and cultural theories, an effort has been made to trace the ideational sources of conflict in the area. It is risky, I am conscious, to oscillate between theoretical abstraction and empirical description, but it seems to me true that the relationship between them is a real one, and the insights that one realm can lend to the other may be worth taking the risk for.

By choosing critical theory as epistemological orientation, causal rigour and parsimony is sometimes traded for a deeper and broader ontology, appreciating that I am tracing a ‘genealogy’ of international politics in the Persian Gulf that defies theoretical closure. I know that this study is perhaps ill-equipped to compete with the empirical analysis of area scholars on the one side, and ‘positivist’ IR theories such as political realism and neo-liberalism on the other, that is both in terms of their parsimonious style and stringent methodology. The strengths of these approaches lie in their axiomatic structure and causal rigour, which permits a level of analytical clarity that other approaches struggle to match. Concomitantly, I assert that those approaches are flawed because they are based on a questionable ontology. The challenge of critical disquisition therefore must be to reread, re-examine and resist reification – to pursue what Nietzsche called the ‘skill to ruminate, which cows possess but modern man lacks’.1 To that end, this study is in opposition to what Andrew Linklater aptly called the ‘resistance to radical, idealist or critical modes of enquiry’.2 Contesting the taken-for-granted facts about the causes of conflict in the Persian Gulf, it is argued, demands radical interpretation and not the reification of apparently authoritative truisms.

Due to its epistemological approach and empirical object of analysis, this study is intrinsically multidisciplinary in its ambition. It agrees with scholars of international relations and area analysts, that due to the limited number of empirical work beyond North America and Western Europe in IR,3 and the theoretical underdevelopment of Middle Eastern Studies, the two disciplines could benefit from more cross-fertilisation.4 By necessity then, this study had to balance between the scholarship of two disciplines. To meet the emphatic demands to both International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies, I tried to look beyond scholarship produced in the ‘Western’ hemisphere, following a generous citation policy to credit these sources – even so readers will still find much ground that has not been covered. I have not limited myself to ‘standard’ literature, choosing instead to consult the spectrum of sources pertinent to the subject of this study. At the same time, the confines of a monograph do not allow for proper coverage of the vast scholarship produced by IR scholars and
those engaged in Area Studies alike. Thus, the bibliography remains selective and not necessarily a measure of what has been seriously engaged in this study. To credit the increasing importance of the Internet for social research, I have included a number of web pages both in the bibliography and the endnotes.

A final note: writing about a geographical area which covers two different languages, I have had to make decisions about words. There is no standard way of transliterating Arabic and Farsi names. In each case, I have employed the most familiar spelling used in the English-speaking world and stuck to it. When the spelling of a book author was different from mine, I reproduced the published spelling. In general, I have tried to guarantee consistency and simplicity.
1 Studying conflict in the Persian Gulf

An epistemological introduction

1.1 Critique, anarchy and genealogy

Far from rejecting or disqualifying a particular theoretical school of thought or methodology in advance, this study tries to radically reinterpret and complement the available literature, with a particular emphasis on those apparently tangential aspects which because of the dominance of ‘materialist’ or ‘realist’ theories of world politics remain marginalised. Intrinsic to the overbearing majority of studies about the Persian Gulf (and world politics in general) is the conviction that states are exclusively driven by material rather than cultural and/or social factors and are hence caught in a perennial competition over scarce resources. At present, the study of international relations has gone in two opposed, some would say epistemologically divergent, directions: one, into an empirically rich, parsimonious and positivist paradigm that boasts of policy-relevance, methodological elegance, simplicity and emphatic relevance for the ‘real world’ of international politics, and two, into a deciphering, unrelentingly critical, yet sometimes also unnecessarily intransigent anti-realism, that identifies itself as ‘constructivist’ and/or ‘post-modern’ scholarship – an active, heterogeneous minority whose ideas have been shaped by European traditions of critical or anti-foundational thought, especially by the critique of the Frankfurt School (primarily Habermas, Adorno, Horkheimer and far less Marcuse, Neumann, Fromm, Pollock and Löwenthal), Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, Barthes, Baudrillard and other canonical figures.

Critical practice is, of course, amenable to a great variety of interpretations, transcending disciplinary boundaries and paradigmatic homogeneity. In our discipline of reference – International Relations – it ameliorates ‘constructivism’, the ‘English school’, the ‘world-polity approach’, post-modernism and post-structuralism, and feminist theories. Despite disparate objects of analysis and different nuances of method and methodology, critical IR theories agree on the ontological premise that international realities are invented or socially manufactured rather than inert facts of nature. Although I risk oversimplification, it is probably correct to say that this is the smallest common denominator of contemporary critical IR theories.

It is a central ambition of this study to bridge the gap between those critical theories of international relations and the empirical study of conflict in the Persian
Gulf. More specifically, I am driven by the renewed interest in the impact of norms, identities, ideologies and other cultural artefacts on international life in West Asia. Scholars writing with neo-realist inclinations such as Barry Buzan, Shibley Telhami and Stephen Walt focus upon perpetual anarchy, security dilemmas, the regional balance of power (or in the case of Walt, balance of threat), polarity and other material variables; scholars borrowing from Marxist and dependency theories see interaction in the region as reflective of the hierarchical structure of the international capitalist system, stressing the causal importance of the international division of labour, core-periphery dependencies, the political economy of oil and ideology; and approaches that may be viewed to stand in ‘liberal’ tradition focus upon shifting patterns of domestic politics, public opinion, interest groups and the role of institutions.

Yet despite the recent (and rather late) ‘discovery’ of West Asia by IR scholars, very little attention has been paid to exploring the relationship between ideational dynamics and anarchy in the area. In the period under focus, stretching from 1971 to the present day, international relations between Persian Gulf states were beset by revolution, civil conflict, inter-state wars and transnational upheaval. Is regional interaction consequently reducible to one continuous, unalterable plot of structural enmity? Is anarchy in the Gulf simply there determined by ahistorical and primordial continuia? Readers of this book will quickly discover that it does not agree with the fatalistic characterisation of the area as a ‘perennial’ conflict formation. Deconstructing the cultural dynamics which have caused inter-state conflict is crucial to my argument here, my basic point being that anarchy in the Persian Gulf has a ‘cultural genealogy’, a Herkunft which demands what Foucault so aptly termed ‘archaeological’ exploration.

It is not at all obvious, that the Gulf has to remain trapped in a historically ciphered cycle of violence that has hampered the institutionalisation of communitarian norms and has scared the lives of its peoples with fulminate force. Nor is it clear, that the geo-strategic significance of the area renders violence inevitable, although the ‘Western’ thirst for the region’s vast oil and gas resources played its part in confronting it with the abominations of empire. Anarchy, that is, the lack of a central authoritative and decisive entity beyond the nation-state does, by itself, not explain the high occurrence of violence in the Persian Gulf. Neither does it preclude the emergence of amicable relations between the littoral states a priori. War, Margaret Mead audaciously asserted amidst the devastation caused by the Second World War, is neither a biological necessity nor a sociological inevitability, but an invented social institution which will be rendered obsolete once a better invention takes its place. If war is a human invention, anarchy must be treated as a human product, or more precisely, an ongoing human production as well. As a manufactured, reified, theoretical mnemonic, it is not biologically given, not a fact of nature. Anarchy is not merely limited to what states make of it; it exists only as a human fabrication and – by extension – as a produce of nation-states.

Let me say a little here about the normative implications of the idea that that there is one, all-encompassing system around the world and that this system has one logic,
self-help anarchy. The culture of thought promoting this pessimistic, almost dismal world-view, accepts and promotes habituating society to accept the ‘kill or be killed rationale’ as an inevitable fact of international life. We will discover later that this has been the political function of anarchism in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and in other places. In the Iraqi case, the Ba’thist grand foreign-policy strategies were formulated according to the ideology that the ‘West’, Jews and Iranians have always constituted an existential threat to the Iraqi nation-state. ‘[T]he indispensable condition of war’ Gordon Allport wrote in the 1960s ‘is that people must expect war and must prepare for war before, under war-minded leadership, they make war. . . . It is in this sense that “wars begin in the minds of men.”’ 21 In other words, in international theory and practice, anarchy is a very powerful concept to legitimate violence, even aggression. For the Ba’thist garrison state, for instance, propagating the self-help nature of the international system was an ideological instrument to habituate its populace to the inevitability of war. Iraqis were told that the ‘backstabbing Persians’, the ‘racist Jews’ and the ‘imperialistic West’ had a prolonged history of hostility against the people of Iraq and the wider Arab worlds. Do theories of self-help anarchy not always legitimate anarchic, aggressive behaviour? Do they not beget, even demand, the invention of the national enemy who has to be fought and hated? I think there is a case to be made that theories of self-help anarchy have implicit and explicit political functions. To put it bluntly, if theory, education, political or cultural indoctrination habituates society to accept war as inevitable, selling warfare as a national or religious duty is greatly facilitated. Anarchy in this political-doctrinaire sense is an ongoing elite production, a ‘reified theoretical fact’, that is not detached from human intentionality. ‘When any theory so represents itself’, Robert Cox rightly cautions, ‘it is the more important to examine it as ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective’. 22 To that end, showing that war and anarchy in the Persian Gulf are not facts of nature but ongoing human productions has become an important epistemological and normative ambition of this book.

If anarchy is not monolithically ‘Hobbesian’ or self-help as (neo)realists argue, it has to follow that the term refers to a stratified, socially constructed order. This view is at the heart of critical theories of international relations. Anarchy conceived in this sense has a genealogy, a historical differentiation that is coded according to the cultural dynamics prevalent in the international society under focus. Whilst genealogy ‘does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people’, it does take issue with the inventions, asymmetries, perversions and diffusions of human interaction. 23 In our case, the purpose of genealogical analysis must be to critically unravel the cultural manufacturing processes of anarchy and conflict in the Persian Gulf. This method is radically different to realist approaches. Whilst political realism has a priori defined (and in its neo-realist version ahistorical) answers to the way decision-makers behave – balance of power calculations, minimising security dilemmas, power maximisation etc. – a genealogical research design inquires where these post facto policy outcomes come from in the first place.

But the critical genealogist does not look back to discover unilinear historical causalities. To the contrary. Genealogical thought challenges the representation of indefinite teleologies, essential systems or law-like propositions, characteristic for
positivist reasoning: ‘The genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin’ said Foucault contemptuously of historical determinism ‘somewhat in the manner of the pious philosopher who needs a doctor to exorcise the shadow of his soul’. Understood in this sense, a genealogy disputes the existence of objective, historically predetermined realities in international relations. This view is relativistic in at least two senses: first it is ‘ontologically relative’ in relation to entities and process, denying that the studied phenomena are inevitable, objective manifestations of reality. And second, it is ‘relative about rationality’, questioning whether scientific theories employed to suggest law-like causalities on the basis of empirical analysis are universally applicable and all-encompassing. In other words, whereas the positivist majority organised around the realist paradigm claim to know how the international world functions, the genealogist attempts to unveil the canopy of facts masquerading as fixed realities. Whereas political realism ‘tends to emphasise the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to, these forces and these tendencies’, genealogical thought highlights the relative autonomy of subjective action and agency as the dominant stimuli for political emancipation. Whereas political realism is a philosophy of adaptation, genealogical practice translates into a philosophy of change.

1.2 Culture, method and dialectical analysis

I have outlined my understanding of two central terms of this study, anarchy and genealogy. I must explain and briefly discuss my understanding of culture now, so that it can be seen what the phrase cultural genealogy of anarchy means for my method and epistemology.

As I use the word, ‘culture’ does not pretend to unravel an experimental science in search of law-like causalities, a dangerous illusion of orientalist reasoning. Yet unlike some post-modern writers, I do believe in the determining imprint of norms, identities, institutions and other cultural artefacts on the world-views of collective entities; nation-states or other formations with an immanent ideational consistency and a highly articulated set of shared knowledge between their constituent agents. Therefore, I study culture as a dialectical phenomenon. A dialectical approach towards culture focuses as much as possible on the manufacturing, reification, theorisation and institutionalisation of culture. How is culture produced, reproduced, legitimated, ideologised, contested and transformed? How is the meaning of culture fixed or stabilised historically via theory and political practice? How does culture affect strategic preferences and foreign-policy decisions?

As it is pursued here, the duty of cultural analysis is not to demonstrate that the past has a deterministic impact on the present, that behaviour is a priori defined. In our case, following Clifford Geertz, ‘culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or process can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described’. It is important to remember that cultural inventions, however monolithic and deterministic they may appear, are essentially human fabrications. Their objective
status does not divorce them from human action. The relationship between the individual, the producer and the cultural world, the product, is and remains a dialectical one. Both are in constant interaction with each other. I have argued elsewhere that these aspects receive their proper recognition once cultural systems are understood in terms of an ongoing dialectical process composed of four moments: (a) externalisation, that is, following Marx and Hegel, the ongoing outpouring of human activity in society as an act of anthropological necessity; (b) objectification, the appearance of externalised cultural artefacts such as norms, institutions, values, traditions, as inter-subjectively shared objects of reality; (c) the internalisation of that objectivated world by agents and (d) the constitutive effects of dialectical introjection on identities, interests and preferences.29

Understanding culture as an ongoing social production complements our ideas about a genealogy of anarchy in the Persian Gulf. If a genealogical analysis of anarchy demands revealing inventions, metaphors and myths, investigating the construction, reification and ideological functioning of culture is helpful to understand how invented facts are processed and mediated. Consequently, a cultural genealogy of anarchy analyses the permeation throughout the Persian Gulf area of values and beliefs constitutive of the conflictual nature of inter-state relations between the littoral states. If Arab/Iranian misperceptions persist, what are the structures of thought reproducing this phenomenon? If opposition to the United States is pervasive, what are the agents and ideologies promoting this view? The Persian Gulf area continues to be the central theatre where various cultures (political, popular, media etc.) interact and fight each other. A cultural genealogy of anarchy interprets these engagements, exploring the use and abuse of ideational constructs and their role in legitimating aggression. Ultimately, the approach has also a normative connotation. It negates that violence is somehow intrinsic to the regional system – or worse obfuscation – that ‘sword-swinging Mullahs’ cannot be appeased, that they need to be bombarded into rationality, that reactionary military force is the panacea for regional violence.

In the second place, a cultural genealogy of anarchy focuses as much as possible on the impact of exclusionary identity politics on foreign policies. It appreciates, following Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and Charles Tilly, ‘the element of artefact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations’ and looks into the relationship between the ongoing manufacturing of the state and the production of ‘enemy-images’.30 It helps us to understand how and why, regional states reverted to exclusionary state identities that were intrinsically anathema to communitarian relations. More specifically, it investigates the impact of Iraq’s Ba’thist brand of Arab nationalism on relations with other Arab states and Iran; the function of Iranian nationalism during the Pahlavi dynasty and the country’s changed self-perception during the revolutionary process of the late 1970s. These issues, it will be argued, are immediate causes of anarchy in the Persian Gulf and demand critical exploration and, perhaps, contestation.

Yet even though it is the first study to explicitly investigate the cultural fabric of international politics in the Persian Gulf from the perspective of critical IR theories, this book is not a general account of regional cultures per se. It will be clear to the reader that I am primarily focusing on political cultural dynamics. Although an effort has been made to include the realms of literature and media, this study is about the
social construction of politically shared knowledge. This cultural fabric is so complexly woven and ‘thick’, that all I could do is to describe elements of it during certain, conflictual periods, and merely to expose a larger whole, complex, intransigent, deterministic, dotted with gnomic personalities, perspicacious discourses and fatalistic events. An important task of future research would be to deconstruct the other dimensions of culture, with a special focus on those existent and strong commonalities that could bring the regional Gulf society closer together. This search for community begets tolerating difference and appreciating congruence, rather than reifying apparently unbridgeable dichotomies. Indeed, there is a case to be made that reifying the myth of a ‘perennial Middle Eastern conflict formation’, has – almost imperceptibly – condemned the region to recurring periods of self-fulfilling disasters. I am very conscious that these are issues left embarrassingly incomplete in this study; had we moved further down our path, we might have complemented analysis of conflict with appreciation of communitarian exigencies.

1.3 Plan of the book

Ultimately, the preceding epistemological ideas offer three principal methodological questions for studying conflict in the Persian Gulf: (1) What are the dominant political norms, institutions, values, identities and other cultural artefacts at a given period of time? (2) How are they invented, changed, reified and transcended by dominant political actors, most notably the state? (3) How do cultural artefacts condition the appearance of power and interest and how do they manifest themselves in strategic preferences?

All three questions relate to the ideational fabric of international politics in the Persian Gulf and – more specifically – the cultural constitution of regional anarchy. The penetrative power of ideas is of course such, that the ideational structure of the Persian Gulf cannot be artificially detached from the rest of international society. Therefore we will address effects emanating from beyond the region if they are significant for behavioural patterns as well. But the following chapters attempt to present as far as possible ‘the’ regional perspective, not out of analytical expediency, but scholarly necessity. There are enough studies that dramatise the impact of the ‘centre’ on the ‘periphery’, a powerful legacy of two ‘grand’ theories: Marxism with its focus on the asymmetries of core-periphery relations, and the so called ‘state-systemic project’ with its propensity for superpower rivalries. But I think that theory and methodology should not predetermine the superiority of one ‘level of analysis’ over the other. In other words, I believe that the impact global impulses have on regional dynamics is difficult to discern in advance. Ultimately, it is a matter of the empirical analysis to explore the relationship between global and regional norms and institutions, and to determine if they are complementary with – or contradictory to – each other.

The three long chapters and one shorter concluding unit into which this book is divided are designed to facilitate as much as possible exposition of the cultural genealogy of anarchy in the Persian Gulf. Chapter 2 juxtaposes regional relations before and after the revolution in Iran. More specifically it develops three principal arguments: the relative pre-revolutionary security sustained by the complementary roles of Saudi Arabia and Iran which was ‘systemically’ legitimated by the United States