



ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL STATES: STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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I. Introduction

Arab states of the Gulf face serious threats caused by human-induced climate change and environmental degradation, including extreme temperatures and heatwaves, water scarcity and droughts, flash floods, sandstorms, and cyclones.¹ The arid and hyper-arid conditions of the Gulf region make it particularly vulnerable to problems such as pollution, land degradation and biodiversity loss due to desertification.² While the discovery of oil in the 20th century brought wealth, development and modernization to a challenging living environment, the same rapid development led to ecologically unsustainable conditions, as oil- and gas-exporting Gulf Arab states account for some of the highest levels of per capita greenhouse gas emissions in the world.³

Although they continue to rely heavily on hydrocarbon exports and reportedly plan to expand production of fossil fuels, Gulf Arab states have increasingly sought to be in tune with the global energy transition and position themselves to reap the potential benefits of the movement towards decarbonization.⁴ This has significantly shifted the attitude and the discourse of Gulf Arab states when it comes to climate and environmental action, as they now put themselves forward as champions of sustainability and the green transition, after having long adopted an obstructionist stance in international climate negotiations. Over the past decade, all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi

¹ Vohra, A., 'The Middle East is becoming literally uninhabitable', *Foreign Policy*, 24 Aug. 2021.

² Alam, M. and Azalie, I. A. N., 'Greening the desert: Sustainability challenges and environmental initiatives in the GCC states', eds M. Rahman and A. Al-Azm, *Social Change in the Gulf Region* (Springer: Singapore, 2023).

³ See e.g. Climate Watch, 'Historical GHG emissions', accessed 21 Oct. 2023; and Zumbrägel, T., 'Between "suffering" and "surfing": Environmental sustainability management and its transnational dynamics on the Arabian Peninsula', eds J. Sowers and M. Lynch, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Studies no. 46 (POMEPS: Washington, DC, May 2022).

⁴ Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Climate Analytics, E3G, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *The Production Gap: Phasing Down or Phasing Up? Top Fossil Fuel Producers Plan Even More Extraction Despite Climate Promises* (SEI, Climate Analytics, E3G, IISD and UNEP: Nov. 2023).

SUMMARY

● This SIPRI Research Policy Paper explores the role of civil society in environmental politics in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In recent years, the Gulf region has seen a shift in official discourses and policies towards sustainability and the energy transition. This has opened up new opportunities for civil society actors to engage with policymakers and the public on issues such as climate change and environmental preservation.

Drawing on interviews with environmental activists from all the GCC states, the paper highlights the challenges facing civil society actors and the opportunities available to them, as well as discusses prospects for further regional civil society cooperation. The paper argues that policymakers in the GCC states need to further expand the space available to civil society actors and strengthen their role in environmental politics. This is in the interest of GCC states, who stand to benefit from greater cooperation with a dynamic, driven and generally well-intentioned civil society if they want to reach their climate targets and implement their ambitious national development strategies. Specifically, the paper recommends easing regulations and legal procedures, facilitating access to funding, supporting youth and female environmental activists, adopting participatory approaches, and facilitating the creation of regional platforms and organizations.



Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) have adopted far-reaching national development strategies or ‘visions’ aimed at diversifying their economies and reducing dependence on fossil fuels.⁵ They have also set net-zero targets and announced strategies and plans to meet them.⁶ For example, in 2021 Saudi Arabia launched its Green Initiative, an ambitious plan to meet global climate targets and enhance the country’s climate action.⁷

Notably, these projects have been highly centralized and largely driven by state authorities. There has been very little space for meaningful participation of civil society actors beyond government-sponsored frameworks. In the Gulf region as elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, the state has traditionally been largely suspicious of civil society and citizen political participation. This includes participation in environmental politics understood broadly as political engagement with environmental issues, such as climate change, environmental degradation, pollution, waste management and water scarcity.⁸ Generally, such political engagement has been seen as a potential challenge to the state; it can even be construed as a ‘threat to national security’ inasmuch as it can call into question and have implications for the very core of the economic and development model on which GCC states depend for their existence and power.⁹

This securitization of environmental issues has for a long time curtailed grassroots and bottom-up environmental activism. This, in turn, has profoundly shaped the modalities of mobilization, focus areas, and the discourses and strategies deployed by Gulf environmental activists.¹⁰ Nevertheless, even in contexts with limited space and opportunities for contestation and political participation such as the GCC states, civil society has become increasingly vocal on environmental issues. The recent shift by GCC states towards embracing the green and energy transition has created more favourable conditions for environmental activists, although many challenges and restrictions remain.

Drawing on insights from interviews and a workshop with environmental activists and experts from the Gulf region, this SIPRI Research Policy Paper explores the dynamics of environmental politics in GCC states.¹¹ The paper first outlines the challenges facing environmental civil society actors in the Gulf region (section II) as well as the opportunities available to them (section III). It then examines the prospects for and potential of regional cooperation on environmental issues between civil society actors

⁵ Mishrif, A., ‘Introduction to economic diversification in the GCC region’, eds A. Mishrif, and Y. Al Balushi, *Economic Diversification in the Gulf Region*, vol. I, (Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore, 2018).

⁶ Al-Sarihi, A., ‘The GCC and the road to net zero’, Middle East Institute, 2 Mar. 2023.

⁷ Saudi and Middle East Green Initiatives, <<https://www.greeninitiatives.gov.sa/about-sgi/>>.

⁸ Visozo, J. C. (ed.), *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa: Proceedings from First Inaugural Conference*, Environmental Politics Series (Arab Reform Initiative: Paris, 23 Sep. 2021).

⁹ Sowers, J., ‘Environmental activism in the Middle East and North Africa’, ed. H. Verhoeven, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East: Local Struggles, Global Connections* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2018), p. 30. See also Crystal, J., ‘The securitization of oil and its ramifications in the Gulf Cooperation Council states’ in the same publication.

¹⁰ Dargin, J., ‘Beyond “green pledges”: Saudi Arabia and society-centered climate reforms’, *Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, 6 July 2023).

¹¹ The workshop was jointly organized by SIPRI, the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the Gulf Research Center (GRC) in March 2023 in Stockholm.



(section IV). Finally, it presents key recommendations to policymakers in GCC states on how to support the engagement of civil society actors in environmental politics so that these states can fully realize their ambitious national development visions (section V). It must be stressed, however, that while the issues and the dynamics analysed here can be found in all GCC states, they are often at play in different ways, reflecting the particular governance structures of each state and the different levels of commitment to the green transition, as well as the varying speeds of implementation of climate-related policies and strategies.¹²

II. Challenges to civil society participation in environmental politics

State–society relations in GCC states have long been guided by an implicit social contract in which rents from natural resources, particularly substantial oil and gas revenues, are redistributed to citizens in the form of generous welfare packages and socio-economic services in exchange for loyalty and limited political rights.¹³ While this implicit social contract has recently been undergoing some change, it continues to shape political and civic participation.¹⁴ The space given to civil society thus remains very restricted, and the freedom of assembly and association is significantly curtailed. Whatever space is allowed is tightly controlled. While independence from the state is often considered a distinctive—if not a defining—feature of civil society, civil society organizations in the Gulf context often have connections and links to the state.¹⁵ For example, many civil society actors receive state support, focus on issues within the perimeter allowed by state authorities and undertake activities that align with and complement action by the state.¹⁶ Others operate within the framework of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). Many of the challenges and obstacles facing Gulf civil society participation in environmental politics are therefore largely connected to the broader long-standing restrictions on political participation.

Legal registration and status

A major challenge for environmental civil society actors in GCC states is the difficulty in obtaining legal registration and being recognized as a non-governmental organization (NGO). Registering an organization as an NGO

¹² Hammad, S., Al-Saidi, M. and Zaidan, E., 'Beyond the pledges: Reflections on sustainability transitions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region', and Zaidan, E., Al-Saidi, M. and Hammad, S., 'Sustainable development in the Arab world: Is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region fit for the challenge?', *Development in Practice*, vol. 29, no. 5 (2019).

¹³ Herb, M. and Lynch, M. (eds), *The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Studies no. 33 (POMEPS: Washington, DC, Jan. 2019).

¹⁴ Hertog, S., 'The end of the old social contract in the Gulf—and what could replace it', London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Middle East Centre Blog, 6 Mar. 2023.

¹⁵ Petersen, J., *The GCC States: Participation, Opposition, and the Fraying of the Social Contract*, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper no. 26 (LSE: London, Dec. 2012), pp. 12–15.

¹⁶ Hayman, R., 'The contribution of civil society to sustainable development in the Gulf and beyond', *Development in Practice* (note 12), pp. 645–50.



is often a long and onerous process, if a legal framework to accord NGO status exists at all. Environmental groups that have attempted to register as an independent organization have generally struggled to navigate complex legal frameworks designed to discourage the formation of NGOs and allow the state to maintain control over the public space. For example, regulations often require organizations to reserve a number of board member seats for government representatives or government-affiliated actors.¹⁷ For environmental groups, this means that all decisions and projects are contingent on obtaining the approval and consensus of all board members and, indirectly, the blessing of state authorities. This also means that civil society actors continually have to explain and justify their work and actions. This can be frustrating, particularly when generational gaps appear and conservative perceptions and attitudes impede creative thinking and innovative approaches. In some cases, an organization may even effectively be taken over by the government, as its original founders are voted out.

Because registering organizations as independent NGOs is such a grueling process, many environmental activists throughout the Gulf prefer to operate in their individual capacities. Others choose to work as part of unregistered initiatives, a framework that gives some flexibility but tends to be woefully inadequate for ensuring long-term sustainability. Unable to register as an NGO, some groups have been forced to adopt a business model and operate as a consultancy. This, however, brings its own set of challenges as the organization is then considered a for-profit entity required to pay tax and potentially ineligible for third-party funding.¹⁸

Across the Gulf region, governments have traditionally adopted a ‘one organization per issue’ approach, whereby some foundations and societies (usually state-sponsored) are exclusively assigned to work within and cover all aspects of a particular issue area. The climate and environmental protection sector is no exception. In many ways, it continues to be a tightly controlled space where only a small number of actors are allowed to operate and which newcomers find extremely difficult to enter.¹⁹ However, precisely because of the gravity of the climate crisis and the systemic scale of the response needed, combining efforts and including actors at different levels and capacities are essential to increase the effectiveness of climate and environmental action. As one environmental activist explained, traditional well-established organizations are facing increasingly heavy workloads, and their limited capacities make them unable to cover all aspects of climate and environmental issues on their own.²⁰ At the same time, centralization often obscures environmental and climate-related issues that are particular to specific groups and communities, while preventing them from creating organizations that focus on their experiences and advocate for them.

¹⁷ Bahraini environmental activists, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023.

¹⁸ Qatari environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023; and Saudi Arabian environmental activist, Interview with authors, 29 Aug. 2023.

¹⁹ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.

²⁰ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.



Funding

Another challenge facing environmental civil society actors in the Gulf is access to funding. Due to licensing and registration issues, access to funding is already constrained. Many environmental activists have thus largely operated as volunteers, contributing their own time and money in the service of climate and environmental action. Those who have gained the recognition of the state as a key stakeholder have managed to secure more resources. Civil society organizations are often reliant on funding from government authorities and private sector actors, which tend to support specific projects that fit with their own priorities. While this has undeniably helped some civil society actors to enhance their action and expand their activities, project-based funding is insufficient to ensure the sustainability of this work. More importantly, heavy reliance on government and private sector funding can make it difficult for organizations to define their own agendas and work towards achieving their own priorities. Sometimes, funding is obtained through the embassies and diplomatic missions of foreign countries but it tends to be extremely limited, due to strict controls over foreign funding. Moreover, because the GCC states are high-income countries, environmental civil society actors from these countries are generally not eligible to receive United Nations agency or development funding.

Inclusion in decision-making processes

Over the past decade, environmental activists in GCC states have seen increasing official openness to and interest in their work, although this tends to vary depending on the level of strategic priority that respective governments bestow on climate and environmental issues. However, despite noticeable progress, a key obstacle for civil society actors is the enduring sense of being excluded from actual decision-making processes.²¹ For example, there is a lack of official and transparent policy processes and inclusive participatory frameworks for civil society actors to engage with governments and state authorities. Many environmental activists report that their work relies heavily on mobilizing resources through their personal and professional networks and high-profile connections in government circles.²² While this has allowed some actors to improve climate and environmental action by unlocking resources and obtaining authorizations, the widespread dependence on connections highlights the exclusive, and exclusionary, nature of the field.

As is the case elsewhere in the world, young people are on the frontlines of climate and environmental action in the Gulf region. A survey of Arab youth's perceptions found that concern about climate change among young people in GCC states has steadily increased over the past few years, with 65 per cent saying that they are 'very concerned' or 'somewhat concerned'

²¹ Hayman (note 16).

²² Saudi Arabian environmental activist, Interview with authors, 9 Aug. 2023; Qatari environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023; Kuwaiti environmental activist, Interview with authors, 30 Aug. 2023; and UAE environmental activist, Interview with authors, 20 Sep. 2023.



in 2023.²³ However, despite the critical role of youth and youth-led civil society organizations in environmental politics, they are still far away from reaching the level of inclusion needed to realize their full potential. Some interviewees mentioned that their relatively young age has sometimes led to their opinions and advice being taken less seriously. As one environmental activist put it: ‘Sometimes youth are given a seat, but it is often a seat to observe, not a seat to participate in decision making.’²⁴

Civil society participation in environmental politics also has gendered dimensions. Women are at the forefront of climate activism and environmental advocacy in the Gulf region. They tend to be highly educated, with backgrounds in environmental sciences or engineering and technology. However, women’s representation varies depending on the area within the climate and environment sector under examination. For example, women are more likely than men to work on the ground and engage directly with communities to raise public awareness, find solutions to concrete problems such as food waste, or promote sustainability through individual behaviour and practices.²⁵ In contrast, men tend to be closer to decision-making centres when it comes to climate and environmental policy. In one interviewee’s apt description, environmental politics consist of many concentric circles that resemble the rings in a tree trunk: ‘On the outer circle, it is all women, but as you get closer to the inner circle, suddenly the ratio changes.’²⁶ Women are still struggling to penetrate these inner circles, and female environmental activists often still grapple with the challenges of operating in largely male-dominated societies as they try to make their way in this domain. There is a need to amplify their voices in leadership positions and increase their access to climate forums and negotiations.²⁷

Access to data and knowledge sharing

Obtaining access to verified and reliable data constitutes another important challenge facing environmental civil society actors in the Gulf region. To better inform climate and environmental policymaking, civil society actors in the Gulf stress the need to conduct research and collect information to remedy the dearth of data and fill knowledge gaps.²⁸ To do this, however, they often must obtain approvals from state authorities, a process that can take a long time due to excessive bureaucracy.²⁹ The limited ability to collect data on different issues connected to climate and environmental policy is detrimental to civil society actors, not least because it denies them relevant opportunities and potential funding streams. As some interviewees emphasized, this tight control over what organizations can investigate

²³ Arab Youth Survey, ‘Amidst rising concern over climate change, majority of young Arabs say they will boycott brands that damage the environment’, 21 Sep. 2023.

²⁴ Saudi Arabian environmental activist, Interview with authors, 29 Aug. 2023.

²⁵ Bahraini environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023; Kuwaiti environmental activist, Interview with authors, 30 Aug. 2023; and Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.

²⁶ Bahraini environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023.

²⁷ Sankar, A., ‘Cop28 an opportunity to amplify women’s role in climate action, experts say’, *The National*, 16 Mar. 2023.

²⁸ Kuwaiti environmental activist, Interview with authors, 30 Aug. 2023.

²⁹ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023; and Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.



and collect data on may reflect a desire to keep the narratives in the field of environmental politics under check.³⁰ Yet, at the same time that the ability of civil society to conduct independent research and data collection is constrained, a number of civil society actors are solicited by ministries and government agencies to undertake studies and gather information on issues that fit with existing government strategies and agendas.³¹

Another issue connected to access to information pertains to government transparency in developing environmental policies and national strategies, including sharing evidence used in setting climate targets and the time frames to achieve them.³² Because public consultations on climate and environmental issues are limited, decisions are often taken without being subject to public debate and deliberation. This raises questions about inclusiveness and the extent to which climate and environmental policy reflects and takes into account the needs of various groups and communities. Furthermore, the low level of transparency of these processes precludes accountability and impedes civil society actors from sharing their expertise and meaningfully contributing to policy development.

Public awareness and perceptions

Although the growing interest of GCC states in sustainability and the green transition has, to some extent, opened up public space for environmentalism and climate-related advocacy, grassroots civil society actors are still struggling to raise public awareness within the wider community, and sometimes even among decision makers. For example, while there is a stronger emphasis on energy transition through large-scale projects and technological innovation, less attention is given to other environmental issues such as waste management, including single-use plastics, recycling practices and water consumption.³³ Nonetheless, awareness and public concern about environmental challenges and climate-related risks are gradually emerging—although there are variations across GCC states, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) leading the way and Kuwait lagging behind.³⁴ Awareness also tends to have a generational aspect, as young people largely constitute the driving force of climate and environmental advocacy. At the same time, precisely because of the growing popularity of climate and environmental issues in the Gulf region—further magnified by enthusiasm ahead of the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) in the UAE in November 2023—there is some concern about the risks of ‘greenwashing’.³⁵ By putting GCC states and the Gulf region in the spotlight, global high-profile events such as COP may generate momentum for mobilization, but may also be an opportunity for greenwashing. This affects not only public and corporate sectors, but also activist circles themselves, with some long-

³⁰ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.

³¹ Qatari environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023.

³² Bahraini environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023. See also Carrington, D., ‘UN climate summit host UAE failed to report methane emissions to UN’, *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2023.

³³ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.

³⁴ Hildebrandt, J. et al., ‘Are consumers in the Gulf states ready to go green?’, Boston Consulting Group, 31 Jan. 2021.

³⁵ UAE environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Aug. 2023.



time environmentalists worrying that environmental activism has become fashionable and that some embrace it opportunistically rather than because of a genuine interest.³⁶ This undermines the work of those who have been struggling for years to strengthen the role of civil society actors in climate and environmental action.

Gulf environmental civil society actors also continue to face difficulties changing deep-rooted misperceptions about environmental activism in particular and civic participation more broadly. For example, even though the situation has improved in recent years and some civil society actors have seemingly cordial relations with state authorities, these actors are still often viewed with suspicion. They continue to be treated as potential adversaries that can call into question the decisions of the state rather than partners and stakeholders that need to be included and consulted if the efforts towards increased sustainability are to be effective. As one environmental activist put it: ‘Our aim is not to condemn the government but to create a better place.’³⁷

III. Opportunities for civil society participation in environmental politics

While environmental activists in GCC states continue to face many challenges, the recent strategic shift by these states towards energy transition and climate action has altered the conditions under which Gulf environmental civil society actors operate. Many depict a relative opening up of public space for civil society and more cordial relations with state authorities. For example, one environmental activist described how, after arduous beginnings, their organization has become a key stakeholder for state authorities and is now benefiting from the ‘hospitality’ of these authorities, thanks to the state’s strategic interest in climate action and environmental sustainability.³⁸ In this activist’s view, the organization has achieved a level of cooperation with the state that many organizations in Western contexts are still struggling to reach, using mobilization strategies that are adapted to the Gulf context.

This symbiotic relationship between state authorities and civil society reveals the increased pragmatism of both sides. Governments benefit from allowing environmental civil society actors some public space inasmuch as they bring their expertise and help build support for national sustainability strategies and renewable energy megaprojects. These actors also contribute to governments’ climate diplomacy and improve their public image.³⁹ In a similar manner, civil society actors pragmatically make use of the space they are given in order to achieve their aims and objectives as far as possible.

³⁶ Qatari environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023; UAE environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023; and Bahraini environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023.

³⁷ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 16 Aug. 2023.

³⁸ Qatari environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023.

³⁹ Omani environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023; Bahraini environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023; Saudi Arabian environmental activist, Interview with authors, 9 Aug. 2023; UAE environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023; and Tabuchi, H., ‘Leaked recording of UAE officials reveals the nation’s concern over its public image’, *New York Times*, 1 Sep. 2023.



Framing and context-sensitive discourse

Despite operating in a context where political activism and contestation are generally limited, environmental civil society actors in the Gulf have benefited from their governments' new discourse on climate change and sustainability. Building on this momentum, many civil society actors are emphasizing their role in constructively helping their countries to pursue sustainable policies. As one interviewee noted: 'Civil society has not had an obstructionist role. [The focus] has been on awareness of climate change and environmental degradation.'⁴⁰

Gulf environmental civil society actors thus aim to advance climate and environmental agendas while attempting to avoid being viewed by governments as opponents or adversaries. Discourse framing plays a role in this balancing act. For example, the term 'activist' is often used with caution due to its association with opposition and confrontation. Instead, many prefer the term climate 'advocate', which highlights to a greater degree civil society's role in raising awareness and building support for a green transition. In Kuwait—the most politically open country among the GCC states, but also the one with the least advanced climate and environmental commitments—one environmental activist described how framing action for the environment as a right for citizens to have their voice heard has helped to open doors and resulted in invitations to meetings with decision makers.⁴¹

By focusing on raising awareness and the importance of scientific research and technological innovations for reaching sustainability, environmental activists have also largely depoliticized the debate around climate change and environmental protection in the Gulf region, even though the implementation of related policies remains political at its core. Issues such as climate justice or the disproportionate impact of climate change and environmental degradation on vulnerable groups (including minorities, stateless persons and migrant workers) are thus rarely broached.

Environmental civil society actors in the Gulf are also likely to show a certain level of tolerance and sensitivity towards their respective countries' reliance on fossil fuels as the basis of their economic development models and welfare systems. Instead of being radically construed as irreconcilable with the enduring heavy dependence on hydrocarbon revenues, environmental activism in the region often recognizes and revolves around the challenges facing Gulf states in balancing economic development and energy transitions. For example, some point out that fossil fuels continue to be vital to the high levels of energy needed to make living conditions bearable in the Gulf, which is one of the hottest and most water-scarce regions in the world.⁴² Others stress that their mobilization for the climate and the environment in no way comes at the cost of socio-economic growth and development, something that they also ensure to clearly communicate as

⁴⁰ Gulf environmental expert, Interview with authors, 21 Aug. 2023.

⁴¹ Freedom House, 'Kuwait: Country profile', Freedom in the World 2023, [n.d.]; Shariff, D., 'Profound implications of climate change not well understood in Kuwait', LSE, 1 Nov. 2021; Alsayegh, O., *Lessons from Kuwait: How the Country's Rentier Democracy Is Slowing Its Energy Transition*, Center for Energy Studies, Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East, Research Paper (Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy: Houston, TX, 5 Apr. 2023); and Kuwaiti environmental activist, Interview with authors, 30 Aug. 2023.

⁴² Kuwaiti environmental activist, Interview with authors, 30 Aug. 2023.



part of their advocacy and outreach.⁴³ Accordingly, rather than adopting radical positions that criticize or reject this heavy dependence, many Gulf environmental activists place an emphasis on promoting sustainability, largely through scientific and technological innovation.

Working within the system

Depending on the existing legal structure of their respective countries, environmental civil society actors have found different creative ways to establish their organizations in a context where NGOs are limited in number or NGO status is not accessible. Examples include registering as independent consultancies and social enterprises or operating under institutional umbrella structures such as universities.

As the official interest in energy transition and sustainability has increased, so have the opportunities available to environmental civil society actors. Environmental civil society actors understand that they can have more impact if their initiatives are not disruptive but instead remain within the boundaries of the space demarcated for them and respect its implicit rules. By identifying and connecting with government focal points, they are able to not only communicate and coordinate with state authorities, but also build support gradually for their work. Furthermore, many environmental activists have seen increased demand for their knowledge and expertise. Working within the system, they tend to position themselves as enablers of a green economy, rather than as a force of opposition or as critics of the government.

This also reflects the understanding among Gulf civil society actors that, without government recognition, support and coordination, their activities would be unsustainable (not least in terms of access to funding) and would therefore fail to attain the impact they ultimately aspire to see on the ground. As one interviewee noted, their efforts to undertake independent individual initiatives have proved difficult to sustain in the long term, whereas engaging directly with relevant policymakers has yielded more results, as they have been able to convey their message while at the same time avoiding open confrontation with government authorities.⁴⁴

By connecting with relevant ministries and government officials, some civil society actors have successfully acquired a stakeholder status that gives them the possibility to be invited to meetings and events. In some instances, being recognized as a stakeholder by state authorities has also brought with it the ability to implement projects that respond to the needs of state authorities, including data gathering and educational activities, as well as awareness building.

Focusing on awareness and capacity building

An important opportunity for civil society actors to participate in environmental politics in the Gulf region consists of raising awareness about climate and environmental issues and contributing to building the capacities of other actors in this area, such as youth, women, schools, companies and

⁴³ Qatari environmental activist, Interview with authors, 15 Aug. 2023.

⁴⁴ Kuwaiti environmental activist, Interview with authors, 30 Aug. 2023.



corporations, public sector employees and so forth. This includes for example organizing public events, training and workshops on the environment and the impacts of climate change, and implementing initiatives in local communities. Civil society actors thus play a crucial role in connecting global processes and discourses on climate change and national-level policies and development strategies to the lived experiences of ordinary people and local communities in the Gulf region. Communication and storytelling are an important part of this work. For example, an environmental activist explained how discussing the changing traditional practice of falconry in the UAE has been an occasion to build awareness by considering the impacts of climate change on the birds' migratory routes.⁴⁵

IV. Prospects for regional cooperation between civil society actors in the Gulf

The Gulf region is among those most exposed to climate and environmental risks, and states in the region share similar climate and environmental challenges that will deeply affect their societies and economies. Recognizing the limits of dependence on hydrocarbon revenues, GCC states have keenly adopted diversification plans. While this has made sustainability and energy transition a site of growing intra-GCC competition—especially between three frontrunners, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—there is a fair amount of regional environmental cooperation at the government level, and important institutional frameworks and mechanisms exist that create and foster synergies in this area.⁴⁶

In contrast, regional cooperation at the level of civil society remains rather limited, despite the strong willingness of environmental civil society actors across the region to collaborate with each other in addressing shared problems. Moreover, regional cooperation between civil society actors continues to be limited not only compared with their mobilization at the national level, but also compared with their participation in global conversations. There have been some efforts to create a region-wide network to streamline environmental action and share best practices and lessons learned, but these efforts have so far not produced substantial results. For example, the Arab Youth Climate Movement (AYCM) was created in 2012 ahead of COP18 in Qatar and was intended as a regional network with chapters in different Arab countries, including GCC states.⁴⁷ However, only the chapter in Qatar has successfully established itself as an independent organization. Although AYCM–Qatar continues to harbour regional aspirations, it faces many challenges, especially legal ones, as it is not really possible to establish regional chapters registered on the same licence. In other words, the same challenges pertaining to legal status and registration that prevail in individual GCC

⁴⁵ UAE environmental activist, Interview with authors, 20 Sep. 2023. See also 'UAE hosts meeting on conservation of migratory birds of prey in Africa, Eurasia', *Alarabiya*, 18 July 2023.

⁴⁶ Gulf environmental expert, Interview with authors, 21 Aug. 2023; Al-Saidi, M., 'Cooperation or competition? State environmental relations and the SDGs agenda in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region', *Environmental Development*, vol. 37 (Mar. 2021); and 'Saudi Cabinet approves regional center for climate change', *Arab News*, 8 Mar. 2023; and Gulf Cooperation Council, 'Environmental Cooperation', [n.d.].

⁴⁷ Altajer, Z., 'The Arab Youth Climate Movement launches in 15 Arab countries', *Alwasat*, 10 Nov. 2023 (in Arabic).



states unsurprisingly also impede the establishment of regional civil society networks and organizations focusing on climate and environmental action at the regional level. In the UAE, the Arab Youth Council for Climate Change (AYCCC), a climate initiative purporting to provide a regional platform for Arab youth, was recently created by the government under the umbrella of the Arab Youth Center. This suggests that GCC states are generally interested in youth participation as part of regional frameworks, but only if this is done on their own terms and under their control.

Another challenge to regional cooperation between Gulf civil society actors is associated with the varying levels of commitment and the different paces of change in their respective countries. Although they face similar climate and environmental risks, GCC states are at different stages in their responses, which perhaps creates some gaps and disparities in how civil society actors view their role in environmental politics and the areas they ought to prioritize. Nonetheless, as some interviewees pointed out, this challenge can be addressed by creating more platforms for discussion to further enhance regional conversations on climate and environmental issues in the Gulf. This would enable civil society actors to identify common issues and collectively think about potential region-wide solutions.⁴⁸ Online networks and platforms have so far been the main channel for regional dialogue and cooperation between civil society actors. In the end, however, while regional cooperation between civil society actors can make important contributions to climate and environmental action in the Gulf region, this will be the case only if governments in the region support it and allow it to thrive.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

The recent strategic commitment to sustainability and energy transition has created an opening for civil society to contribute to climate and environmental action in GCC states. Across the Gulf region, there has been a notable increase in the political will of governments to engage with civil society actors and give them space to participate in environmental politics. Many civil society actors are now working in tandem with state authorities, providing support and contributing to the implementation of plans and strategies. This burgeoning cooperation between civil society and state authorities is a promising development and a step in the right direction. However, the participation of Gulf civil society actors in environmental politics has not yet reached its full potential and many obstacles continue to prevent them from playing a more substantial and effective role in shaping environmental policy in their respective countries. Civil society actors have found ways to circumvent restrictions and make the best of the situation by adapting their action to the context. However, more can be done to facilitate their work and enhance their action. Governments need to further expand the space available to civil society actors and address the challenges they face. Doing so is in the interest of GCC states who stand to benefit from greater cooperation with a dynamic, driven and generally well-intentioned

⁴⁸ Bahraini environmental activist, Interview with authors, 21 Sep. 2023.



civil society. This paper puts forward the following recommendations for strengthening the role of Gulf civil society in environmental politics.

Ease regulations and legal procedures for establishing independent organizations. Governments and policymakers in GCC states should clarify and simplify the regulatory frameworks applicable to the creation of NGOs, including requirements related to the composition of their governing boards. Where a legal framework for establishing NGOs does not exist, it should be created. This would expand the freedom of association and assembly of environmental civil society actors and encourage more people to join and contribute to climate and environmental efforts. It would also help environmental groups to enhance their action and move from ad hoc initiatives and campaigns to developing and implementing long-term agendas and projects within institutionally more sustainable structures.

Facilitate access to funding. Improving the access of environmental civil society actors to funding is critical to the efficiency and the sustainability of their work in the Gulf region. Government and private sector funding for civil society initiatives and projects is important, but it should not involve conditions or expectations that encroach on the independence and the freedom of action of environmental civil society actors. Access to other funding opportunities should also be facilitated.

Support youth-led initiatives and networks. Young people have extensively contributed to advancing climate and environmental action in the Gulf, often as volunteers with limited resources. GCC states should continue investing in youth as agents of change not only by ensuring that educational and skill development opportunities are equally accessible to youth from all backgrounds, but also by including youth in decision-making processes, at the global, national and subnational levels.

Empower female climate and environmental activists. Climate and environmental issues disproportionately affect women and girls, often exacerbating already existing challenges and structural inequalities.⁴⁹ Across the Gulf region, women and girls have played a pivotal role in driving climate and environmental action. Policymakers should strive to achieve equal gender representation in various spaces of the climate and environment sector, including policy development circles.

Adopt participatory and inclusive approaches. This involves improving public access to information and holding open public consultations on climate and environmental policies. Engaging Gulf civil society actors from the outset in deliberations, planning and implementation of environmental and climate-related policies and initiatives could help to increase the inclusiveness and representativeness of these processes. This would increase transparency, promote accountability and produce more effective policies.

⁴⁹ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Subsidiary Body for Implementation, 56th session, 'Dimensions and examples of the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, the role of women as agents of change and opportunities for women', Synthesis report by the secretariat, FCCC/SBI/2022/7, 1 June 2022.



Facilitate the creation of independent regional platforms for environmental civil society. A cross-GCC civil society organization would provide a much-needed framework for identifying common concerns, setting shared priorities, and coordinating climate and environmental responses. Such a framework could also facilitate region-wide data sharing, research dissemination and regional dialogue and exchange.



Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| AYCM | Arab Youth Climate Movement |
| COP | United Nations Climate Change Conference |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UN | United Nations |

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SIPRI RESEARCH POLICY PAPER

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL STATES: STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

AMAL BOURHROUS AND EMELIE POIGNANT KHAFAGI

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