Best of Arabs, Worst of Arabs

The story of the Gulf region and the Levant is a tale of two subregions that have always differed starkly from each other. The Levant – corresponding loosely to modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine – has been in its winter of despair for more than 60 years, with several conflicts simmering and erupting at regular intervals throughout, including the most recent war on Gaza by Israel.

Striking a Dickensian parallel, the same period can be described as a spring of hope in the Gulf region. The ultramodern cities across the Gulf, which barely existed little more than a decade ago, are a testament to the drive aimed at transforming the societies of the Arabian Peninsula from a tribal and largely nomadic past. To be sure, the current contrast could not be starker between the neat urban planning of Abu Dhabi or Doha, for example, and the mad clutter of Damascus or Beirut.

Beyond the crumbling skyline, the stagnation in the Levantine world is visible in most fields, from arcane and inefficient bureaucracies to chronic internecine feuds. Compare that with the development of Gulf Arabs, who have largely succeeded in resolving their differences within the framework of the Gulf Co-ordination Council and whose leaders have used oil wealth to embark on various programmes of domestic reform.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the ties between the Gulf region and the Levant were mainly symbolic or psychological in nature. Even with the rise of Islam in the 610s and despite its roots in the Arabian Peninsula, a distinction was made between the Muslim tribes of the desert and their urban and sophisticated counterparts who ruled the Middle East first from Damascus under the Umayyads and subsequently from Baghdad under the Abbasids.

Indeed it is a shared past – from the secretive Nabataens in the south who built Petra in modern Jordan to the community in Ugarit, Syria, who are credited with the invention of the alphabet – that continues to bind together the societies of the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean. Cumulatively, these societies were part of what was known as the civilized south in pre-Christian, Hellenic times; the East in Roman and Byzantine times; the Orient or Levant in medieval times and the Near East in modern times (see box).

The contemporary twist in the plot is that, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the Gulf and the Levant have experienced a very tangible reversal in fortunes and a paradigm shift in their respective roles.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, has evolved into a powerful religious and cultural force in the Arab world, assisting poorer states in the Middle East and influencing regional policies through oil wealth and a strong belief in its role as guardians of the Muslim faith.

The Saudi connection to the Levant grew out of a perception of a raft of common regional threats, ranging from the establishment of Israel and the occupation of Jerusalem, which resonates deeply in the body politics of all Arab states; to the superpower confrontation of the twentieth century,

with its unrelenting competition for regional allies; to a perception of a power void in the region, following the demise of the Soviet Union, which Saddam Hussein attempted to fill in the 1980s and 1990s. Currently, Saudi foreign policy in the Levant, particularly in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories, seeks to counterbalance Iran's growing sphere of influence.

Of course, other Gulf states have also sought to exert an influence in the Levant. For instance, while Saudi mediation in Lebanon's civil war resulted in the Taef Accord, the United Arab Emirates provided a contingent back in the 1970s for the short-lived Arab Deterrent Force in Lebanon. More recently, in 2008, Qatar brokered the Doha Agreement between the Hezbollah-led opposition and the Western- and Saudi-backed government of Fouad Siniora.

In addition to moral and diplomatic support, Gulf financial assistance to the Levant has grown steadily over the decades, with official development assistance from the Gulf to the Levant and Egypt totalling some $75 billion from 1970 to 2006, according to the Arab Monetary Fund.

The relationship between the states of the Levant and the Gulf has become symbiotic, blurring the old subregional distinctions. On the one hand, a co-operative system has been developed whereby the Gulf states provide economic and moral leadership by virtue of their wealth, and the poorer Levantine states provide military and labour forces to support Gulf regimes – currently, more than half of the work force in the Gulf region comes from non-Gulf states.

Moreover, the Gulf has become more sensitive to actions and policies of non-Gulf Arab states and is exposed to the ethnic tensions, growing radicalism and conflicts that sway other areas of the Middle East. Consequently, even as the Gulf can affect the economic security of the Levant, non-Gulf Arab states can affect the political security of the Gulf. Within that context, daily images of the carnage in Gaza deepen ties between Gulf Arabs and their Levantine counterparts, but also serve to radicalise the population in the Gulf.

For much of Arab history, the Gulf region represented something of a backwater to the rest of the Middle East, which itself fell behind the rest of the world economically and politically from the fifteenth century onwards. The new relationship between the Gulf and the Levant is a measure of the political dynamism and growing awareness of the Gulf's role in the global economy. In a very real sense – from a Gulf perspective – this is the best of times and the worst of times.

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