



Article

Gulf Studies: The Imperatives of Area Studies in the Gulf Region

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Abstract: Area Studies is in crisis, but research on Area Studies also demonstrates the relevance of and need for Area Studies through case studies in different world regions. However, there is a dearth of research on the imperatives of Gulf Area Studies in the Gulf region, which provides the rationale for this study. This study examines the imperatives of Gulf studies by addressing a wide range of questions: Why is Area Studies still relevant? What are the challenges and prospects for Area Studies in general and Gulf studies in particular? What makes a region a region and, therefore, an area of interest and research? Why is it necessary to produce Gulf-specific knowledge? What are the ways forward for Gulf studies? This paper addresses these questions within three broad themes: debates in Area Studies, the Gulf as a region, and Gulf studies within the Gulf region. Drawing on the existing scholarship, we argue that producing area-specific knowledge in the Gulf is not a luxury, but rather a necessity, despite its challenges. Decentering Gulf studies away from the Western academic umbrella to the Gulf region is a crucial move with far-reaching implications for the field of Gulf studies. However, the discipline of Gulf studies must evolve, and fundamentally reposition itself in order to keep pace with rapidly transforming Gulf society in the years to come.

Keywords: Area Studies; Gulf studies; Arabian Peninsula Studies; Gulf region; GCC states; Arab Gulf states



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1. Introduction

The world has witnessed major events in the past three years, which have significantly impacted both political and academic discourses alike. A deadly infectious pandemic, a war in the European continent, and a looming global economic crisis are factors that have altered and rearranged the world's political order; old alliances are disintegrating, new alliances are taking shape, and an energy crisis is manifesting. The single-superpower order in the world is no longer valid, and a new competition multipolar system is forming. In these uncertain and strained global conditions, the interest in and the need for Area Studies are growing exceptionally. Area Studies is a tool to understand the cultural, social, and political particularities of regions. Geographical, social, economic, and historical factors contribute to creating a region, which must include a certain level of common features and characteristics within a specific geographical area (Acharya 1999; Ndayi 2006). These characteristics can be cultural, linguistic, social, economic, and/or political. Area Studies aims to analyze regions, portraying a comprehensive picture of the particularities and characteristics of a specific region and its inhabitants (Tessler et al. 1999; Mirsepassi et al. 2003a; Szanton 2002a; Derichs 2015; Chua et al. 2019; Amour 2020).

Area Studies as an academic subfield emerged and flourished in the United States (US) between the 1940s and the early 1990s, in a context influenced by the political agenda (for details, see Szanton 2002b; Mielke and Hornidge 2017; Ludden 1997). Following the Second World War (WWII) and throughout the Cold War, the US administration “supported Area Studies as a means of achieving knowledge about and controlling over potential adversaries

and allies”, including in the Gulf (for details, see [Mirsepassi et al. 2003b](#), p. 3; [Schwartz 1980](#)). Area Studies and the concept of regionness are closely related; theorizing regionness helps to identify the criteria for considering a specific area as a region, and to determine the level of regionness in that region and the dynamics of regionalization processes ([Rafael 1999](#); [Lucia 2019](#)). The concept of regionness has developed since the 1950s due to organizational changes in the framework of the international system, which have been political, social, and economic. Interest in regionness then declined for a short period, only to reemerge again since the 1980s—impacted, likewise, by the changes in the global system ([Hettne and Söderbaum 2000](#)). Historically, the need for linking Area Studies and regionness has been severely downplayed ([Rafael 1999](#)). In this paper, it is argued that rethinking regions and regionalism can contribute to a better understanding of Area Studies, in our case Gulf studies, and provide indigenous perspectives to challenge the prevailing Eurocentric Orientalist narratives.

Area Studies has entered a crisis of legitimacy since the late 1980s, and existing literature extensively analyzes the nature of this crisis (see, for example, [Alatas 1995](#); [King 2005](#); [Sidaway 2013](#); [Szanton 2002a](#); [Ludden 1998](#); [Bilgin 2008](#); [Pepinsky 2015](#); [Lewis and Wigen 1999](#); [Goh 2011](#); [Jackson 2003](#); [D’Amato et al. 2022](#); [Teti 2007](#); [Gray 2018](#); [Byrd and Miri 2022](#)). In Europe, the criticisms have generally been taken on board, and specialists have moved on from there to focus on new approaches which can resolve the problems of the past, as in ‘Comparative Area Studies’ ([Ahram et al. 2018](#)). The continuing debates on Area Studies can in some ways be seen as a positive aspect of the field: a continuing debate about valid approaches.

Thus, Area Studies has been a subject of debate within scholarly circles ever since it emerged as an academic subfield. Studies of a ‘controversial’ region such as the Gulf have long been perceived as too ‘exceptional’ to be considered a source for theoretical insights ([Mahdavi 2015](#)). The concerns raised about Area Studies in general and particularly studies of the Gulf go beyond its ability—compared with mainstream social science disciplines—to provide universalistic knowledge. Concerns relate to the relevance of Area Studies in a globalized world, its image as an American enterprise, and its existence as a reflection of Western-centrism ([Alebrahim 2020](#)). Historically, the Gulf region has been studied as an integral part of Middle East Studies in the West. The critics of mainstream Middle East Studies generally suggest three major drawbacks: parochialism; a disposition against theory; and exceptionalism ([Bayat 2001](#)). Although some of these concerns hold a level of validity and are worth consideration, acknowledging gaps and weaknesses does not mean that this area of study should be abandoned. Even well-established disciplines have theoretical and methodological gaps and remain inadequate to provide full explanations of various phenomena ([Bayat 2001](#)). As we attempt to show in the current paper, Gulf studies as Area Studies on and within the Gulf need to be preserved and nurtured in order to address these issues.

Recently, Chua Beng Huat and his colleagues explained the crisis of legitimacy in Area Studies in three broad terms: ‘weak rules’, ‘hard borders’, and ‘ancestral sin’ ([Chua et al. 2019](#)). The absence of an intellectual core constitutes the ‘weak rules’. The researchers elaborate that disciplinary departments often claim to have their own theoretical traditions and methodological canons that provide the intellectual glue in their studies. In contrast, Area Studies uses the region as its intellectual glue, rather than theory or methodology. ‘Hard borders’ is understood in the context of globalization. With the increases in global flows, circuits, and interdependencies, the argument is that tight borders do not work well, and traditional approaches to Area Studies struggle in the context of new global actors. Area Studies often falls into a ‘territorial trap’ ([Agnew 1994](#)), often having the effect of spatially shackling scholarship, whether at the national or regional level. Finally, ‘ancestral sin’ refers to Area Studies’ origins in the global North, not in the regions the research aims to understand ([Chua et al. 2019](#)). In the relevant sections of this paper, we elaborate on these issues and discuss the ways forward.

Thus, we observe a crisis in Area Studies, but existing scholarship also demonstrates convincingly the relevance of and need for Area Studies, through case studies in different world regions (Chua et al. 2019; King 2005; Ludden 2003; Mirsepassi et al. 2003a; Rehbein et al. 2020; Schwartz 1980; Mielke and Hornidge 2017; Hanson 2009). However, there is a dearth of research on the imperatives of Gulf Area Studies in the Gulf region, providing the rationale for this much-needed study. We focus on the Gulf region and examine the imperatives of Gulf studies by answering a wide range of questions: Why is Area Studies still relevant? What makes a region a region and, hence, the object of interest and a unit of Area Studies? Why is it a necessity to produce area-specific knowledge in the Gulf region? What are the challenges and prospects for Area Studies in the Gulf? What are the ways forward for Gulf studies? This paper addresses these questions, among others, across three broad themes: the debates in Area Studies, the Gulf as a region, and Gulf studies in the Gulf. This paper puts forward the argument that producing area-specific knowledge in the Gulf is not a luxury, but is in fact a necessity, despite the challenges.

Five sections comprise the current paper: The next section identifies emerging issues relating to Area Studies and discusses various challenges and opportunities in the context of the Gulf. We go deeper in the analysis of the challenges posed by the rise of globalization, universalism, the dilemma of Area Studies as a Western endeavor, and recent trends in moving the sites of Area Studies from the global North to the global South. The next section takes the Gulf region as a case study to examine the relevance and necessity of producing area-specific knowledge. This section shows that the Gulf region can be analyzed as an example and a model of the different phases of the regionalization process, especially the phase of “regional community”. Finally, we address the need for producing area-specific knowledge in the Gulf, as well as the current developments and ways forward for Gulf studies as an academic subfield.

2. Area Studies: Debates and Emerging Issues

The historical and theoretical discourse of Area Studies has been dominated by several major controversial issues: firstly, the rise of area studies itself as an American enterprise in the shadow of a Western-centric and an Orientalist view of the global South¹; secondly, the universal nature of social sciences versus the specific, area-related knowledge produced by Area Studies; and thirdly and finally, the impact of globalization, the way it has influenced Area Studies, and its relevance. These issues are discussed thoroughly in the existing literature, often with examples from regions other than the Gulf (Bates 1997; Bilgin and Morton 2002; Graham and Kantor 2007; Harrison and Helgesen 2019; Chua et al. 2019; King 2005; Ludden 2003; Lie 2012; Derichs 2014). Here we revisit these debates, employing the Gulf region as a case study.

2.1. Orientalism and Area Studies: From Geo-Colonial to Geo-Strategical

There is an important relationship between Area Studies and Oriental studies, in the sense that Area Studies is the heir to Orientalism, which was the way Europeans dealt with the non-Western world as a colonial power (for details, see Kolluoglu-Kirli 2003; Ludden 1998). We cannot talk about Oriental studies without referring to imperialism, and the European expansion in the region since the 17th century (Mielke and Hornidge 2017). Orientalism can be understood as a discourse, “as the corporate institution dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views on it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978, pp. 2–3). Thus, the Orientalist approach came about from a perspective of the superiority of the white man and a lust for exploitation of the resources and people of the East. Orientalists study cultures, histories, and languages related to the Orient (Said 1978, p. 2).

The field of Area Studies emerged in the USA with WWII, which saw the US rise to hegemony in the world system, and Area Studies gradually flourished in the academic culture in North America. While Orientalism is seen as a European enterprise, Area Studies

is viewed as an American enterprise (Kolluoglu-Kirli 2003). In Europe, Orientalism was taught in humanities departments. However, when Orientalism crossed the Atlantic, the US universities made the study of the non-West a subject of social science instead of the humanities, a tectonic shift in terms of theoretical and methodological orientations to area-specific knowledge production. One of the reasons for the success of Area Studies in the USA was the collaboration between US armed services and universities that designed and taught wartime training programs (for details, see Szanton 2002b; Mitchell 2002). Through such programs, higher education institutions provided their expertise in foreign languages, cultures, and societies to assist military forces' operations (Niu 2020). In 1958, the National Defense Education Act was passed to facilitate funding for language, history, and geography studies on regions of interest. Area Studies programs, projects, conferences, and publications were supported by major funding foundations such as the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation (Mitchell 2002; Szanton 2002b). As Mirsepassi, Basu, and Weaver state: "The U.S. government supported area studies programs as a means of achieving knowledge about and control over potential adversaries and allies during the Cold War" (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b, p. 3).

It should be noted that geopolitical and security considerations were taken into account while deciding which areas of world research activities to fund. In Asia, for example, funds were mainly provided to programs that studied China and Southeast Asia—because of the existence of communist influence or regimes there—while South Asia was neglected (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b). It is also argued that Latin American and Middle Eastern studies were shaped by the USA's strategic considerations during the Cold War (Sidaway 2013). Considering the deep engagement with and patronages of Orientalism and Area Studies, Chua and his colleagues suggest that the origins of the drive toward Area Studies were "geo-colonial in Europe and geo-strategic in the United States" (Chua et al. 2019, p. 34).

Funding from a government security entity such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reinforces claims that lay doubts on the neutrality and independence of outcomes reported by the recipient centers for Area Studies. Such engagement suggests that research activities would tend to be 'guided' to some extent and aligned more with the strategic concerns and interests of such governmental entities, accordingly, influencing the independence that any research center should have. The implications of this influence were noted in the government-funded research on Vietnam, which has been criticized for depicting the Asian state "as having no past or future than what was imposed by the Western liberals or Soviet communists" (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b, p. 4).

It appeared that Area Studies were contributing to American *imperialism*. For some time, area studies in the USA reflected the state's imperial projects (Sidaway 2013), and to some extent assisted in delivering them. Moreover, the area-specific knowledge that was produced in this context was to some extent intended to assist the USA in exploiting the 'other' in many respects and by various means. This mode of knowledge was less to do with the regions under investigation and more about the USA and the West in general. Area Studies based in the USA have inherited the approach of Orientalism toward the non-West. The knowledge that was produced under the remit of Area Studies was meant to serve the purpose of monitoring and controlling the non-West. Kolluoglu-Kirli (2003) mentions that "such knowledge has been shaped by the ontological distinction drawn between *us* and *them* and by the uneven power relations" (p. 107). The key motivator for the US support for area studies was its interest in understanding and accordingly manipulating and controlling the studied region. Said best describes it in his book *Orientalism* by saying that Orient and Area Studies represent:

A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philosophical texts, it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction but also of a whole series of "interests" . . . it has to do less with the Orient than it does with "our world" [the Occident, in this case, the US] (Said 1978, p. 17).

Up until the late 1980s, studies that concerned the Gulf region, were largely focused on investigating either the role of 'Islamists' or the Arab–Israeli conflict (Amour 2012).

However, a very strong body of work emerged relating to the political economy of the region (often under the umbrella of oil rentier states theory) (Mahdavy 1970; Beblawi 1987) and an obsession with “Gulf Security” (Naff 1985; Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research 1997; Sick and Potter 2002). Therefore, the early association between Area Studies and the US government’s political agenda has made many view the academic discipline with skepticism—especially in regions that have been influenced by US foreign policy, such as Southeast Asian states as well as the Gulf region (for details, see Sidaway 2013; Little 2002; AlUbaydli et al. 2022). Furthermore, it could also be argued that the ‘US Area Studies’ analyses of various regions were built on American or Western political values and concepts—e.g., liberalism, individualism—influencing their understanding and framing of ‘Eastern’ cultures and societies, concepts which also stem from American Orientalism. Interestingly, a significant distinction between European and American Orientalism is that Americans had little involvement with the Middle East before WWII, unlike the British and the French. Douglas Little examined the history of American involvement in the Middle East and concluded that inaccurate portrayals of the region have contributed to repeated policy blunders (Little 2002). Little argues that US policymakers have often been misguided by “American Orientalism”, which he defines as “a tendency to underestimate the people of the region and to overestimate America’s ability to make a bad situation better” (Little 2002, p. 314).

While the above criticism is to some extent valid within its historical time and place, it should not be an excuse to abandon Area Studies. Rather, it should be understood as an invitation for those who are directly implicated in the region to produce area-specific knowledge of the region. This highlights the importance of Area Studies scholarship established away from American and Western influence—whether intellectual, political, or financial—in various parts of the world, such as the Gulf Studies Center. It suggests the role that local scholars can play in ‘detaching’ Area Studies from being perceived as an American enterprise. This would be the best response to such criticisms and to the ‘US-based’ Area Studies.

2.2. Universalism and Area Studies

Academic disciplines are often arranged on a continuum between the universal (or nomothetic) and the particular (or idiographic)² (Bates 1996). A universal or nomothetic form of knowledge seeks to achieve universal truths in the manner of the natural sciences, such as we find in neoclassical economics and structural linguistics in the human sciences. Particular or idiographic knowledge relates to information and analysis in the manner of the traditional humanities, as exemplified in literary studies and historical linguistics (Lie 2012). In other words, the nomothetic approach attempts to broaden the scope of knowledge claims through laws, generalizations, and theories, while the idiographic seeks to narrow the scope of its epistemic validity by relying on local knowledge or events (for details, see Bates 1997; Chansa-Ngavej and Lee 2017; Graham and Kantor 2007; Harbeson et al. 2001; Mielke and Hornidge 2017; Mitchell 2002). Particularistic knowledge is nuanced, culturally rich, and involves context-specific studies of times and places (Karp 1997). Briefly, particularistic knowledge is usually considered singular and therefore impervious to generalization, while universal knowledge is considered timeless and placeless due to its universalizable and generalizable features (Lie 2012).

Thus, the major argument held against Area Studies concerns the ability to produce knowledge that is “divorced from time and place” (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b, p. 7) and, related to this, the capacity of the discipline to ‘anticipate’ the future³. This is even more problematic for studies of the Gulf, which is part of a region that has been long perceived to be exceptional in the sense that it is considered unfit to inform or be informed by “conventional social science concepts and perspectives” (Bayat 2001, p. 151). For centuries, in imitation of the natural sciences, social science disciplines have been attempting to create universalistic forms of knowledge, by developing formal models and providing generalizable propositions regarding the empirical world (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b). Area

Studies, on the other hand, and Gulf studies in this case, provide knowledge that is supposedly particular to a region (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b), and thus fail to serve the ‘presumed task’ of the social sciences.

This argument is enforced by the well-established positivist and explanatory approaches of ‘hard’ social sciences, where statistical data and formal modelling are used (Graham and Kantor 2007). As highlighted by Drake and Hilbink (2002), the field of Area Studies has been criticized for “being primarily descriptive, largely atheoretical, and—above all—methodologically soft and, hence, unanalytical or unscientific” (Drake and Hilbink 2002, p. 23). Such weaknesses are found to be more apparent in studies that concern the Gulf. Even those that are based “on sound statistical and qualitative methodologies” are seen to “have limited theoretical utility” (Gray 2018, p. 4). Therefore, progress in Gulf studies is said to require more “theoretical and cross-comparative approaches” (Lysa et al. n.d.).

The methodological strength of the mainstream social sciences enforces the assumption that they are more universally applicable, more useful in comparison to Area Studies, and, hence, worthy of support (Ludden 2003). This perception perhaps also limits the way in which the Gulf region is approached analytically, as scholars have tended to use the ‘conventional’—already exhausted—frameworks (e.g., rentier theory, oil-monarch concept, new authoritarian approach, to name a few) (Amour 2012, 2020; Abdulla 2010). Although such theoretical formulations were useful in the past, especially in Gulf states during the initial phases following the oil booms in the 1970s and 1980s, they “no longer give credible readings of the current realities of the region” (Abdulla 2010, p. 4).

The problems with this argument around the universality of Area Studies are several. A core issue with this argument is that it is formulated on a basis that considers the knowledge produced in the USA and Europe as the standard or key reference with which any knowledge that is produced elsewhere must align (i.e., a form of Western-centrism). Consider the study of politics and the example of democratic transitions. For a few decades, the knowledge produced on this topic “has been based nearly exclusively on empirical research in Europe and America” (Harbeson 1997, p. 29). The Gulf region, however, has been found exceptional to such theories and was described to be “resistant to democratic ideals and institutions” (Mahdavi 2015). This highlights how ‘universal’ knowledge that is claimed can fail to accommodate a particular case. This inability—albeit occasional—of social sciences, in this case, political science to entertain a topic that is important to the Gulf or other regions is perhaps partially related to the fact that newer methodological and theoretical approaches in social sciences, which have mostly been developed in Europe and the USA, “have harbored implicit definitions that are resistant to including these issues and subjects” (Harbeson 1997, p. 30). A truly universal knowledge of democratic transitions will be formulated from “findings that emerge from other areas” (Harbeson 1997, p. 29).

Another issue on the surface of this argument is that it undervalues and underestimates the contribution of Area Studies to social sciences and disregards the fact that the former serves the development of the latter. On one hand, it fails to recognize that Area Studies can “serve as a testing ground for universalization of social sciences” (Mitchell 2002, p. 8). Area Studies—and in this case, Gulf studies—allow “testing, redefining, and reformulating social science theories via their analyses across the spectrum of the regions of the world” (Harbeson et al. 2001, p. 787). On the other hand, the argument fails to recognize Area Studies’ valuable additions. Consider the contribution to political science as an example. Political scientists whose works focused on regions outside Europe and the USA have added significantly to the theories and concepts of the discipline—such as theories of political culture, modernization, and dependency theory, to name a few (Harbeson et al. 2001, p. 787).

Moreover, such an argument does not acknowledge the fact that no single academic discipline has the capacity to capture and convey a full understanding of a society or a culture, nor that the multidisciplinary of Area Studies assists toward this end (Szanton 2002b; Schwartz 1980). It fails to recognize that cultural differences matter. They matter

because they can challenge the foundations of academic disciplines that intend to create universalistic claims. In psychology, for instance, Geeraert (2018) mentions that culture has an influence on thinking style. Moreover, he indicates that the way people describe themselves seems to be culturally bound (Geeraert 2018). Harrison and Helgesen refer to another psychologist, Richard Nisbett, who reached a similar conclusion and indicated that people's views or perceptions of the world around them are influenced by "differing ecologies, social structures, philosophies, and educational systems" (Harrison and Helgesen 2019, p. 5). These findings highlight that an approach that disregards cultural differences would be inadequate for understanding people and societies around the world. Disregarding Area Studies means that we are disregarding the scholarly works that challenged and are challenging "the concepts and theories that are 'conventional wisdom' of the discipline" (Harbeson et al. 2001, p. 787).

Societal development, whether in the Gulf or elsewhere, cannot simply be reduced to merely a process of growth or modernization through a rising pattern in which the underdeveloped 'peripheries' move toward the developed 'center', i.e., the West. Societies develop differently and according to varied cultural influences (Harrison and Helgesen 2019), and Area Studies, including Gulf studies, are positioned to capture these developments and their contexts.

2.3. Globalization and Area Studies

The abovementioned universalist argument also links to another argument raised against Area Studies, which relates to the phenomenon of globalization (Appadurai 2000). The relevance of producing area-specific knowledge in a 'globalized' world has been questioned ever since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, after which the US was situated as 'the' global dominant power (Ludden 1998; Lie 2012; Juergensmeyer 2013). Political and economic reforms around the world seemed to be 'inspired' by the US—or Western—models. Following the collapse of communism, it seemed that states, especially in the global 'South', were turning to liberal democracy. Moreover, with the rise of transnational corporations, it seemed that more regions and states were turning to liberalize their economies. It is suggested that this increasing pace of globalization erases the differences between people in various places (Harrison and Helgesen 2019).

Globalization has also become more prominent in the academic discourse, particularly in US scholarly circles (Robertson 1992) that were once the 'patrons' of Area Studies. There seemed to be an assumption that 'US-led' globalization would not encounter any opposition and that it would be a process that dominated the world. Accordingly, new modes of knowledge were needed; knowledge modes that are more universally applicable and globally useful, i.e., universalist (Ludden 1998). This was reinforced by the international political climate following the end of the Cold War; Area Studies seemed to have lost their importance as there was 'no need' for Soviet or Eastern Europe studies, for instance (Sidaway 2013), due to the assumption that these regions would be caught up by waves of globalization, would adopt American political and economic models, and would believe in and practice American values.

From that perspective, globalization is exaggerated, and scientific and technological advancements are exalted. From such a standpoint, globalization is perceived as "natural, inevitable, imminent, and devoid of human volition" (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b, p. 10). The problem with this point of view is that it does not even attempt to recognize regional 'particularities', similar to the universalists' view. There is also a misconception that people in different regions of the world experience modernization in the same manner and that they conceptualize or visualize modernity similarly—more specifically, similar to Westerners' experiences and conceptualizations of modernization. Many distinct factors contribute to people's experiences of modernization.

Consider climate change as an example of a global phenomenon that is assumed to affect and influence everyone. While it is assumed that it impacts all regions, each

region is presumably impacted differently, due to certain particularities. The Gulf region, for instance, as a low-lying coastal region, is expected to be impacted by the rise of sea levels. The region is also expected to experience a decrease in precipitation levels. Other regions are expected to go through similar or different impacts of climate change (Center for Science Education n.d.). The socioeconomic implications of climate change also differ from one area to another. Various aspects of people's livelihoods are expected to be impacted. Regions' abilities to implement climate change adaptation and mitigation measures are also influenced by various aspects related to natural, societal, institutional, infrastructural, and technical realities and capabilities. Many regions, including the Gulf, face a great deal of challenge in adopting and implementing climate change policies. Approaching climate change therefore necessitates production of area-based knowledge that recognizes context and particularities, and the case is similar for other pressing topics and issues.

Producing area-specific knowledge contributes to a greater understanding of the region's realities, and accordingly contributes to producing context-specific or context-sensitive solutions or interventions. Failure to recognize the social and cultural inputs and outcomes of the modernization process will lead to a flattened or superficial understanding of regions and how they undergo changes. Globalization should therefore be explored considering cultural and social differentiations, "which can only be understood through rigorous area-based knowledge" (Mirsepassi et al. 2003b, p. 13). Ludden (2003) argues that there is no single site capable of producing or controlling global knowledge, because producers themselves are located within the worlds of their production, which leads to diverging modes of knowing (p. 135). To understand the local consequences of global processes and reactions to them, we must therefore become familiar with and sensitive to individual regions (Basedau and Koellner 2007, p. 107). Due to the nature of globalization, the need for area-based knowledge in general, and Gulf studies in particular, does not diminish but rather increases as a result.

3. The Gulf as a Region

Few regions in the world have such evident characteristics of regionness as the Gulf: geographic contiguousness, long shared history, common culture, language, traditions, religion, and identity, to mention some aspects. Travelling from Doha to Manama, or from Kuwait to Riyadh, one will not miss the common cultural and social symbols among the peoples of the region, including similar dialects, dress codes, food habits, and most importantly, common values and patterns of behavior. There are many factors that have helped to create a strong sense of regionness in the Gulf area; most notably, the common economic, political, and social structures that created a strong *Khaleeji* (Arab Gulf) identity and a sense of belonging among the inhabitants of the region (Karolak and Allam 2020). While several theories have touched upon the idea of regionness, this paper draws largely on the new regionalism theory (NRT). Based on this theory, we contemplate on how far the Gulf area can be considered as a "region". However, our discussion of the Gulf in this section is primarily limited to the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, namely Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. This section presents three interrelated issues relating to the Gulf as a region. Firstly, it introduces a few key concepts related to regionalism and describes the theoretical assumptions of new regionalism, in order to advance the argument for the Gulf as a 'regional community'. Secondly, it scrutinizes the Gulf region as a geographically contiguous area. Thirdly and finally, it argues that the Gulf region can be understood as a 'regional community' in the light of the theoretical perspective provided by the new regionalism.

3.1. New Regionalism Theory (NRT)

The study of regions, regionalism, regionalization, and regionness, together with Area Studies and politics, has produced considerable scholarship over the decades (Acharya 1999; Lucia 2019; Ndayi 2006; Rafael 1999; Riggiozzi 2012; Hettne 1996; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Farrell et al. 2005; Halliday 2005; Hurrell 2005). State-centered theories tend to take

the nation-state as a departure point for defining “region”. Hence, they focus on geographic linkages and mutual dependency as central factors. Meanwhile, NRT scholars focus on social structures and processes; they confirm that “what constitutes a region is determined by the level of ‘regionness’ of the area in question and emphasizes social processes in the study of the phenomenon” (Ndayi 2006, p. 114). Obuse and Salvatore (2022) argue that the constructions of regions produced by the West, according to the Western model, have prevailed even amongst the peoples of the East. They described how the Middle East was regionalized through Western constructions of geographical mapping processes in the postcolonial era (Obuse and Salvatore 2022).

Regionness is another central concept in the new regionalism theory. Hettne defined regionness “in terms of organized social, political, and economic trans-border relations (material foundations of regionalism), supported by a manifested sense of belonging, common goals and values (symbolic foundations), and institutions and regulations that enhance the region’s ability to interact autonomously in the international arena (external recognition as an actor)” (Riggirozzi 2012, p. 425). Based on these factors, a region’s levels of regionness can both increase and decrease, depending on the social, political, and economic dynamics. In this process, the region naturally progresses from being merely a regional space to express its regionness in the form of political institutions and through grand regionalization projects. In an advanced level of regionness, according to Riggirozzi (2012), the region develops a permanent structure of decision-making, and an ability to perform in unity as a global or regional actor.

The NRT views social processes as the main defining drive of a region and rejects the importance of geographic contiguity as a prominent factor for defining a region. This view might be influenced by recent changes in the international economic structure that result from neo-liberal models and globalization. Traditional regionalism theories, which focus on nation states, usually affirm that a region should be identified by a definite geographic entity embodied by geographic contiguity and limited to a certain continent. Any description not fitting this definition should not be referred to as a region. Meanwhile, it can be claimed that new regionalism is removing geographical limitations; one main feature of new regionalism is the tendency to expand regions to continental levels, as seen in the transformation of Western Europe into the European Union after granting membership to several of the countries in the former Eastern bloc.

New regionalism theorists such as Hettne, Söderbaum, and Riggirozzi focused on how to define a region by defining its level of regionness (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Riggirozzi 2012). Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) presented five levels of ‘regionness’, which can be used for describing how functional a region is. The first level depends on the region’s degree of geographic unity, and to what extent it is encircled by any sort of natural physical characteristics. The second level is marked by the establishment of a social system, which involves building large social networks that transcend the local and group levels to accommodate securely the communities involved. In the third level, the region looks like a coherent cooperative in terms of its social, economic, cultural, political, and defense aspects. The fourth level deals with common values and communication frameworks that extend naturally throughout the region, constituting a harmonious civil society. The fifth and last level is the level of ‘region-state’. This level is more theoretical than practical, involving a unified sense of identity, the ability to act as one actor, and the presence of a unified decision-making body. This phase is referred to as a “supernatural entity” (Hettne 1996).

Riggirozzi presents a similar model of levels of regionness, which is also divided into five categories, or levels of regionness (Riggirozzi 2012). The first form is regional space, marked by existence in a geographically connected area. The second form in this model is called a “regional complex”, where the communities in a geographically connected area develop complex relations, interdependence, and shared security concerns. Riggirozzi calls the third form “regional society”, where states and non-state actors engage in a process of trans-network building and systematic cooperation, supported by formal policy structures. The fourth form is the regional community; here, we find a sense of social and cultural

harmony that transcends the local communities, creating a grand regional community that builds on shared values, traditions, and behavior patterns. The fifth and last form involves the region turning into an institutionalized regional actor, with shared political institutions, practices, and forms of governance, supported by an advanced level of unified identity and sense of belonging (Riggirozzi 2012). In the following two sections, we analyze the Gulf region from the perspective of the new regionalism theory.

3.2. *The Gulf Region as a Geographical Contagious Area*

The relation between politics and space is examined by the scientific discipline of geopolitics. Geography is detrimental in the formation of regions and affects the level of regionness. Areas without natural boundaries such as mountains, seas, and rivers, have allowed nomadic lifestyles and enabled the flow of migrants, merchants, and goods since early history. These areas normally have a high potential to form a “region” and enjoy a high level of regionness. This description is very relevant in the case of the Gulf, especially considering that the trade routes of the old world passed through the region from early on (Peterson 1991; Gray 2018; Onley and Nonneman 2020). This geographical location placed the region in the heart of the Old World. In his book titled *Security and territoriality in the Persian Gulf: a maritime political geography*, Mojtahed-Zadeh mentions that “the Gulf represents a homogeneous environment in its own right. This region includes nations varying in some cultural respects, but with similarities of political, strategic, and economic preoccupations. It includes Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain” (Mojtahed-Zadeh 1999, p. 9).

From early on, the movement of nomadic tribes and the exchange of trade between the two shores of the Gulf created a situation of cultural richness and a language mixture that strengthened the distinct community of the Gulf as a region. These common circumstances provided a good opportunity for the coastline nations on the shores of the Gulf to work together to create an economic grouping that was a necessity for the economic survival of the region’s peoples, especially in the modern period after the rise of the multi-polar economic system that marked a strategic turning point in the word of geopolitics (for details, see Potter 2014; Hanieh 2015).

The similar economic structures, security concerns, and strategic issues among the region’s states have been shaped by geopolitics and are quite remarkable. The region gained global strategic significance after the discovery of oil and gas at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it gradually became the leading source of energy with the biggest oil and gas reserves in the world (Miniaoui 2020). The Gulf covers an area of about 29,500 square miles and possesses estimated oil reserves of 565 billion barrels, more than 63 percent of the world’s total known oil reserves which are estimated at 896.5 billion barrels (Mojtahed-Zadeh 1999).

The dynamics of regionalization in the Arab Gulf states, like elsewhere, started with geography, which impacted history, politics, and the economy, and gradually constructed a common regional identity (Karolak and Allam 2020). Colonial interest in the region started since the 17th century, due to its strategic location on trade routes to the Old World, especially India. Until WWII, the British were the main colonial power in the region, and most of the Sheikdoms were British protectorates. By the early 1970s, the British had withdrawn from the region, paving the way for the establishment of the nation states as we know them today, and for American involvement as a security sponsor of the states in the region. The security of this region, in particular, has been and remains a vital concern for regional oil producers and major consumers around the world. There is no wonder that the region has been a subject of interest including political and military interference from global superpowers (Sandwick 2019; Bilgin 2019). In many ways, security concerns brought the Arab Gulf states together to form a regional political order, which culminating in the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on 25th May 1981. In this way, we find that the Gulf states are geographically contagious areas bonded by mutual history, religion, geography, language, and social and cultural ties.

3.3. *The Gulf Region as a 'Regional Community'*

There are strong indications that the GCC states have a high level of regionness and can be described at a minimum as a 'regional community' according to the models designed by theorists of new regionalism. This can be particularly seen when analyzing the political, social, and economic dimensions in the region.

When analyzing the economic structures, we find that models of rentierism and state patronship are dominant features in all states in the region, due to their dependence on oil revenues. The GCC states share similar labor markets that are dependent on foreign labor through work migration. This has made the region one of the most labor-attracting areas in the world. These astonishing similarities have created good opportunities for cooperation. Since the six GCC states signed a customs union in 2003, the economic integration among these states has developed enormously. Their national plans are coordinated toward economic diversification, implementation of climate agreements, and food security (Miniaoui 2020). These economic structures rely on modes of social and economic integration while strengthening a new sense of unity and identity.

As with the economic sphere, the region also enjoys a high level of similarity in the political sphere regarding governance systems and foreign policies. The political systems in the Gulf are very similar, whether absolute monarchies such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar or mixed regimes such as Bahrain and Kuwait. They are built on the social contract with citizens where people accept a form of state patronship in return for a generous system of welfare and services that depends on the distribution of oil revenues and a taxation-free economy. By the early 1970s, all the states in the Gulf had obtained their independence and they have since then cooperated in the political sphere. This cooperation materialized in the establishment of the GCC in 1980, as the official platform for the political and economic integration of the region. The states in the region have since moved toward greater representation of the people. They have formed political representation councils, whether consultative or legislative, which are elected, appointed, or mixed. The GCC states aim to reach full political integration, especially when it comes to foreign policy and issues of regional security. The efforts intensified after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the two Gulf wars, as well as the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program.

Among all aspects of integration in the region, the social aspect is the most important and influential. The peoples inhabiting the region share strong social and cultural connections that classify the region as a "regional community". The social fabric, customs, traditions, and value systems are very similar. The nomadic tribes that inhabited the region a long time ago moved freely and settled in different places before the establishment of nation states. Therefore, the element of tribalism has been an essential social phenomenon that has influenced the social structure. Tribalism influenced these societies to a great extent and helped maintain and strengthen social relationships between the local communities of the Gulf. These elements helped create a flow of ideas and influence that shaped the customs, traditions, and value systems in the region as a whole. Yet, the most vital related outcome is a common regional identity and a sense of unity and belonging.

As we witness today, new young generations that came to power in the GCC states are ambitious and less conservative. New political trends, new strategies, and more openness have prevailed under the leadership of these young rulers, but the situation is not free from challenges. Different visions of foreign policies have led to a significant rift in the region, that ended up imposing a siege on Qatar in 2017. However, this issue can be analyzed as a "side effect" of regionalism, which also has its dilemmas (Riggiozzi 2012). Thus, we can conclude that the GCC states enjoy a high level of regionness, representing, at the minimum, a regional community with a shared value system and sense of identity.

4. Gulf Studies in the Gulf

There is no wonder that the Gulf region has been, from early on, a central subject of research for Area Studies (Onley and Nonneman 2020), regardless of academia's later perception of their quality or value. This section discusses three interrelated issues: research

deficiency in the Gulf, the need for area-specific knowledge in the Gulf region, and the nature of the challenges affecting Gulf studies. In this section, we analyze the necessities, challenges, and prospects for Gulf studies in the Gulf region.

4.1. Research 'Deficiency' in the Gulf

The research productivity of the Gulf region remains modest, whether in social sciences in general or Gulf studies in particular, regardless of the Gulf states' wealth and the awareness—or the lack of it—of the importance of research. Stronger academic and research capacities will assist the Gulf states in confronting the mounting social, political, economic, environmental, and security challenges (Shami 2016, p. 4). The quantity and quality of the research that comes out of the GCC remain low, regardless of the increase in investment in research infrastructure (although the ratio of investment in research and development to GDP remains well below the OECD average) (Karabchuk et al. 2022; Meo et al. 2016). The challenges that are faced relating to knowledge production at higher education institutions include the limited number of PhD programs, the lack of collaborative platforms, the scarcity of partnerships between research and public and private sectors, and the limited influence that research has on the policy agenda (PwC 2019; AlUbaydli et al. 2022). Knowledge production in the Arabic language faces the same challenges and more, considering that the Arabic language in research is marginalized in general (Hanafi and Arvanitis 2014). It could be assumed that knowledge production in the Persian language would encounter the same obstacles that related to English language dominance.

The research activities that existed in the Gulf were mostly restricted to universities and its research centers and carried out largely by 'foreign' scholars, who were recruited on a temporary basis. The lack of research institutions has led some governments in the Gulf to hire Westerners to carry out studies and provide policy recommendations to meet various challenges (Waast et al. 2010). The recent article published by C.W. Jones entitled 'All the King's Consultants' echoed similar concerns (Jones 2019). The implications of approaching different challenges that are specific to the Gulf through hired Westerners—who lack a comprehensive understanding of culture and society in the Gulf—have somewhat complicated those challenges rather than easing them. Consider the 2001 educational policy reform in Qatar as an example. An American policy think tank, The RAND Corporation, was hired to propose reform options that would develop the educational system in the state and enhance its outcomes. The educational model that was proposed and implemented could be described as a 'borrowed' model. Unfortunately, the significant outcome of such a model was almost two decades of policy instability in the education sector and associated public dissatisfaction. All the policy reforms that were implemented have been reversed, indicating their failure (Alkhater 2016).

Therefore, there is a need to produce knowledge about the region from within the region itself. Local context cannot easily be captured by those outside it, as we saw with the educational policy reform, and can be better noticed by those who are situated in the state or the region and by those who are more 'engaged' with the context. Accordingly, establishing Area Studies programs can assist with informing policy and designing policies that are sensitive or specific to the context, because borrowed policies do not operate well. It is also important, however, to acknowledge that the factors contributing to the research crisis in the Gulf region do not entirely relate to the 'quantity' of its research institutions or the quality of the knowledge they produce. Instead, they partially relate to the political atmosphere in the Gulf states and the constraints that are imposed that hinder the tackling or discussion of 'taboos' among scholarly circles within the region.

4.2. The Need for Area-Specific Knowledge in the Gulf

A key reason for producing area-specific knowledge about the Gulf 'from' or 'in' the Gulf is the fact that a substantial part of the existing body of the knowledge about the region has been produced through Western-centric lenses. For many centuries, knowledge in humanities and the social sciences has been produced exclusively from European, Western

perspectives (Alebrahim 2020). Non-European communities and cultures “were described by Europeans in Europe’s languages and have been explained and interpreted according to European theories” (Rehbein et al. 2020, p. 66). These theories were again assumed universal, with no consideration for ‘local’ perspectives or social and cultural contexts. European or Western ‘truth’ about the ‘other’, has dominated for a long time. The dominant paradigms have been “informing or influencing the work of those who write or research” about the Gulf and the Middle East as a whole (Nasr and Hajjar 1997, p. 16).

An example of Western centrism in some works about the Gulf is the influence of the former on concepts and terms of the latter, and the resulting effect on the knowledge that has been or is being produced. Different concepts and terminologies are usually understood and discussed based on pre-existing knowledge about them, which is mainly produced in the ‘West’. However, one should consider how certain concepts and terminology are understood in various languages and cultures, and their relevance to particular regions that have their own linguistic and cultural particularities. Alebrahim (2020) notes in this regard that Eurocentric concepts and terminology have been problematic in the study of Gulf history. He highlights the importance of accurately analyzing the meaning or definition of historical terms and the ways they are used in different societies, and how that could contribute to increased depth in historical works.

Alebrahim (2020) gives the example of the use of the term ‘bourgeois’ in Calvert W Jones’ book *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization*, discussing the relevance and accuracy of such a term to the Gulf region and the people being analyzed. Such a term is understood in a specific way in Western scholarship and reflects a Marxist perspective. The Bedouins—in terms of their social and economic status in the Gulf society—were not necessarily always ‘poor’ as implied by the title and argument of the book. They can be considered middle class, since they lived in conditions that are comparable to those of the middle classes in other regions, which undermines the idea of transformation from one social class to another as implied in the book’s title (Alebrahim 2020). We find similar biases in other topics such as research and analysis of migration in the Gulf. There has been a scholarly effort to illustrate temporary labor migration in the Gulf region as an ‘immigration’ phenomenon (Fargues 2011). Once we conceptualize Gulf migration as an ‘immigration’ phenomenon, it involves a number of issues such as citizenship, integration, equality of opportunity, and many other social, economic, and legal rights. The problem with this Western conceptualization is that it does not accurately represent the reality in the Gulf or the similar reality that we find across the global South.

Universalists argue that the nature of knowledge and the boundaries between regions and cultures have changed. Accordingly, they question the relevance of Area Studies and the need for area-specific knowledge. They further argue that globalization has created a universal context for all humanity, that the boundaries between cultures have become blurred, and these cultures are no longer the same. These arguments undermine the credibility of knowledge produced by area specialists. However, do we still need area-specific knowledge, and why? These above-mentioned arguments are a reproduction of new forms of ethnocentric, Orientalist approaches, enforcing a modern Western perception of a certain epistemological context. As Ludden explains: “after all, European power covered the globe with language of science and humanism. Cultural areas also may be little more than constructs of imperialism, imagined territories institutionalized by Europe’s domineering modernity” (Ludden 2003, p. 134).

It is true that knowledge has become global and interactive in nature, but it is also insistently local and multiple. Differences and cultural diversity remain significant dimensions of the social nature of today’s world. The Gulf region has more than half of the world’s energy reserves and has therefore been at the center of attention for area specialists and politicians alike. The region stands out as a distinct cultural geographical entity, marked with common formal and informal political, social, and economic structures. The distinctive set of norms, traditions, linguistic, and social structures have made understanding the depth of its social fabric a hard task for scholars from outside the region. It is not surprising

that the image portrayed of the region in the Western media and even in academia can be biased, unrealistic, and politicized. This explains the rationale for establishing Gulf studies in the Gulf region, outside the traditional sites of Area Studies knowledge production in the West.

4.3. *Gulf Studies: Nature and Challenges*

J. Onley and G. Nonneman provide a comprehensive overview of the development of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies (GAPS), starting from writings about the Arabian Peninsula since the days of Herodotus up until 2020 (Onley and Nonneman 2020). Their monumental work is first of its kind to offer a historical treatment of the field of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies in a holistic manner. They state that Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies began to evolve as a global interdisciplinary field in 1969, but remained a marginal subfield within Middle East Studies. Beginning in the 2000s and reaching critical mass in the 2010s, Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies became a mainstream field in its own right, culminating in the formation of the Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies and the introduction of the *Journal of Arabian Studies*. Gray (2018) identifies “Gulf moments” in Middle Eastern studies, claiming that there have been two “Gulf moments” in Middle Eastern studies: the first began in the 1970s and continued through the 1990s while the second has persisted since the 2000s (Gray 2018). Both of these ‘Gulf moments’ are broadly attributed to changes in the social, political, and economic landscapes of the Gulf itself and to renewed interest among scholars and policymakers in pursuing academically sound research in the region.

In 2011, among many other initiatives, Qatar University launched the first Gulf studies graduate program in the GCC states to focus exclusively on the Gulf within the region itself. Chua et al. (2019) argue that any comprehensive rethinking of Area Studies needs to address three broad questions: How do we structure Area Studies programs institutionally? What do we teach in Area Studies? How do we conduct research in Area Studies? Here, we examine these separate but intersecting questions, reflecting on Gulf studies at Qatar University. Firstly, an important purpose of the establishment of Gulf studies in the region is to assist in overcoming the problem of the lack of teaching and research endeavors in and on the region. Gulf studies have been institutionally created and incubated at the College of Arts and Sciences at Qatar University, with a clear mandate to run a graduate program in Gulf studies and conduct cutting-edge research on the Gulf region.

Secondly, Gulf studies offers both MA and PhD degrees, allowing students to gain an advanced interdisciplinary understanding of issues related to the contemporary Gulf region. The graduate program focuses on three distinct thematic areas: politics and security, energy and economics, and social and cultural issues. With its interdisciplinary curriculum taught entirely in English, the program offers a holistic understanding of the region through courses and research in broad thematic areas. The MA degree is based on a two-year program, and students need to complete a total of 36 credit hours, with 21 credit hours from required courses, including a thesis of 6 credit hours and 15 credit hours of elective courses, encompassing a wide range of subjects. As part of the PhD program, students are required to complete 60 credit hours of course work: 21 credit hours of core courses, 9 credit hours of elective courses, and 30 credit hours of dissertation work. There are currently about eighty graduate students pursuing MA and PhD degrees at the Gulf studies program, which accepts around 15–20 graduate students per year as part of the annual intake. In terms of gender diversity and national origin, 61 percent of graduate students are female, and 39 percent are male, while 62 percent are students of 19 national origins and 38 percent are Qataris. A total of 68 percent of students are pursuing doctoral degrees, while 32 percent are pursuing master’s degrees.

Thirdly, Qatar University established the Gulf Studies Center (GSC) in 2013 as part of the Gulf studies program. The Gulf studies program and Gulf Research Center complement each other and engage in training future generations of scholars on and in the Gulf and contributing to Gulf-specific knowledge production. Being the first of its kind in the region,

the center has the potential to counterbalance the biased and politicized perceptions of the region. The center's geographical closeness, as well as its community and regional bonds, are vital advantages. Being located in the heart of the Gulf gives the center the potential to produce highly credible firsthand knowledge. In this respect, the GSC has started its publication series and is advancing quickly on this front. Three lead researchers are coordinating Center's three core areas, namely politics and security, energy and economics, and social and cultural issues, with a focus on the Gulf region in general. The center publishes Gulf insights, Gulf briefs, and Gulf working papers and operates a book series and regular journal. Conferences, workshops, and seminars are organized at the Gulf Studies Center throughout the year. Between 2018 and 2021, the faculty members of the GSC produced 53 academic pieces including books, journal articles, and book chapters. Among other activities, the GSC published 52 papers as in-house publications and organized 62 international and national conferences, workshops, and seminars in the same period. Faculties of the GSC are running Spring Nature Gulf Studies book series and Journal of Gulf Studies. The Gulf Studies book series has published eight volumes on various aspects of the Gulf societies in last three years (Rahman and Al-Azm 2023; Cochrane and Al-Hababi 2023; Ali and Jumat 2021; Harub 2022; Tausch 2021; Miniaoui 2020; Zweiri and Qawasmi 2021; Zweiri et al. 2021). However, more efforts are necessary to attain a better outreach to the international academic field. The challenges will inevitably include securing sufficient funds and maintaining durability, since the process is normally costly, time-consuming, and requires short- and long-term planning.

I. Karp (1997) identifies three facets of the crisis in Area Studies: funding, conceptual and psychological issues, and political economy (Karp 1997). The first facet is related to funding, and Area Studies programs usually suffer from a lack of funding in the West due to the volatility the great powers' interests in Area Studies. However, this is not an issue of concern for Gulf studies in the Gulf. The second facet is related simultaneously to conceptual and psychological issues. Karp (1997) argues that units of analysis in Area Studies, such as cultures and regions, are deemed inappropriate or irrelevant to the analyses of social processes such as migration or cultural flows, because such social phenomena are not often geographically restricted. The third and final aspect is that of political economy which determines how resources are allocated within the university depending on the global hierarchies of culture and society, and which is again hardly relevant for Gulf studies in the region.

Chua et al. (2019) articulate and advocate four doctrinal positions in response to the challenges facing contemporary Area Studies in Asia: porous regions; regions in flux; comparativism; and deep intersubjectivity. We agree that these doctrinal positions are also applicable to Area Studies in other regions, such as the Gulf. First, it is our view that there is a need to treat the Gulf region as open and porous. With the increase of global flows, circuits, and interdependencies, tight regional borders do not work well. Globalization may not create what Ohmae (1990) refers to as a 'borderless world', but it does connect in new ways places that are often spatially dispersed, such as the recruitment of Asian and African migrants in labor markets in the GCC states. Second, it is important to accept that Gulf regions are in flux, and that as such their spatial articulations may alter comparatively quickly and fundamentally, as we noticed during the 2017 Gulf crisis and with the new realignment between the Gulf states and global powers (Baabood 2019; Zweiri et al. 2021). Third, there is an urgency to be open and responsive to inter-regional and intra-regional comparative engagements. In relation to many important social, economic, and political issues, Gulf societies cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration North Africa and South Asia. Such comparativism may act as an antidote to essentialist and exceptionalist tendencies (Chua et al. 2019). Fourth, we need to embrace 'interdisciplinarity'; that is, researchers from diverse disciplines should collaborate to develop novel solutions (Rigg and Mason 2018). The scope of interdisciplinary research relies heavily on the research themes and contexts (Toomey et al. 2015). We can broadly identify two types of interdisciplinarity: shallow and deep interdisciplinarity. One may choose either 'shallow'

interdisciplinarity that takes place between allied disciplines such as humanities and social sciences, or ‘deep’ disciplinarity that occurs between predictive nature sciences and interpretative social sciences and humanities (for details, see [Chua et al. 2019](#)). Gulf studies will benefit from both types of interdisciplinary research.

The Gulf region, a part of the global South, has attracted huge attention from research centers as well as Area Studies scholars in the West. The knowledge produced about the Orient has been considered by many scholars, for instance, Edward Said, to be biased, ethnocentric, and, in many cases, politicized. Area Studies research centers in the global South—such as the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University—have the potential to generate authentic scientific knowledge.

5. Gulf Studies: Ways Forward

The future of Gulf studies and its research agendas are partially dependent on policy-makers’ agendas. Policies in the Gulf region—especially those of Arab Gulf states—have transformed in the past two decades and are more focused toward certain interests and priorities ([Gray 2018](#)). Many of these are defined in the national development strategies or ‘National Visions’ that have been launched, such as those of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Such interests and priorities can drive research activities in the region as they did in the past ([Gray 2018](#)). This is also reinforced by the fact that the majority of research projects and activities in GCC countries are government funded. Some Gulf states have launched ‘national’ research strategies, such as the that of Qatar, to identify key areas of interest and steer research activities toward them.

Scholarly interest in the Gulf is also influenced by events and dynamics within and outside the region ([Gray 2018](#)). Major events on the global scale, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as well as regional tensions, such as the previously mentioned siege crisis of 2017–2021, continue to evoke scholarly attention on the region, considering its geopolitical and economic importance for various actors and the role it plays in these respects at the international and regional levels. Trends in Gulf studies are also impacted by the trends and developments in mainstream social sciences or other branches of Area Studies ([Gray 2018](#)). The introduction of new or modified theoretical and methodological approaches that can be utilized in the context of the Gulf guide the works that concern the area, until another contribution is made.

Centers in the Gulf area are more suited to producing academic knowledge about the region, from within the region itself, and have advantages in this respect. One striking problem is the limited expertise that Arab scholars have about countries in the Middle East other than their own ([Nasr and Hajjar 1997](#)). However, Area Studies need to focus on empirical and conceptual problems posed by the territoriality of knowledge, widen the modes of knowledge, and focus on the imperial aspects of globalization. This also applies to Gulf studies. Second, Area Studies should produce knowledge that can be relevant for policymakers. Kramer points to the “relevance gap that has opened up between academics and policymakers” ([Bilgin 2004](#)). Third, diversity is vital for the future of Area Studies. Scholars of Gulf studies need to move beyond their own areas of specialization and interest and into to other areas, and reach out to the public and international publication platforms. Moreover, new ways of thinking and new evaluation methods should be adopted ([Ludden 1997](#), p. 27).

Changes in global power structures and in priorities for area-specific knowledge production may naturally have influenced where Area Studies scholarship is pursued (e.g., in the Western or Non-Western world), what falls under the Area Studies rubric (e.g., languages, cultures, social and political issues, basic or applied research), how it is pursued (e.g., disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or trans-disciplinary), and who funds it (e.g., universities or organizations) ([Sidaway et al. 2016](#)). Nevertheless, the need for Area Studies has not fundamentally changed as a result of these developments. There is no doubt that the Gulf region itself has changed massively and profoundly over recent decades. Given the depth and speed of social and economic transformation in the region, Gulf studies will

need to evolve fundamentally if it is to keep pace with the rapidly changing Gulf society. A strong desire exists among scholars in the region to theorize from within the Gulf, rather than to use the Gulf as a testing ground for theories. An attempt to move Gulf studies into the Gulf region that it studies, out from under the Western academic umbrella, is vital and has far-reaching implications for teaching and research in Gulf Area Studies. This will become increasingly evident over the coming years as the Gulf studies develop and reach their full potential, and the results begin to become more tangible.

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Notes

- ¹ Area Studies, in its current institutionalized forms, is widely considered an American enterprise, considering the circumstances that has led to its (re)emergence and flourishing in the US in modern history. However, it is worth noting here that writings about regions or areas, with perspectives such as of those of ‘modern’ Area Studies, were known earlier in history and perhaps cannot be traced to a specific era or credited to a certain region. Some scholars argue, for instance, that area-specific writings were known in China in the 1880s, with the works of Wei Yuan, who published a manuscript on “Maritime States” in 1844 (for details, see [Cheng and Liu 2022](#); [Leonard 1984](#)). In Europe, there was substantial Area Studies writing from in the 18th century, for instance, the work of William Jones (1746–1794). It is our view that it is not correct to term the whole of European studies of the non-Western world as “Oriental Studies”, as much of it was anthropological and linguistic ([Momma 1999](#)).
- ² John [Lie \(2012\)](#) notes that this classic distinction was proposed by Wilhelm Windelband ([1912] 1993), though a much clearer articulation can be found in [Rickert \(1915\)](#).
- ³ It is worth noting that this critique is held against social sciences in general and area studies in particular, including its associated expertise in the broader Middle East region ([Halliday 2005](#)).

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