

Do the Arab Gulf States belong to the South?, Silvia Ferabolli

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I have been asked repeatedly if the Arab Gulf States (AGS) are “members” of the Global South – as if it was a club whose membership was dependent upon some particular traits or distinguished behaviour. The fact is that in the burgeoning literature on the Global South, the AGS (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) are marginalized and this has consequences to our understanding of the conceptual meaning and political significance of the South.

It is not news that the scholarship on the Global South and South-South relations is BRICScentric and that when Arab states and peoples appear in this emerging body of knowledge they are irrelevant, on the sidelines, an afterthought even. Locating them in the Global South is therefore controversial, especially if we are talking about the Arab Gulf States. It is as if they did not fit into the proposed narrative – as if they did not have the right credentials to get in.

However, word-playing with Waltz’s famous statement that “it would be ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica,” I would suggest that it is just as absurd to construct a theory of the Global South based on the BRICS. The distortions generated by Waltz’s focus on great powers and his contempt for Costa Rica are reproduced within Global South studies with an excessive focus on the BRICS at the expense of other countries, regions, institutions, movements and individuals, especially those who do not fit into the emerging narrative of the Global South. The BRICS as a group and its member states separately match too perfectly the narrative of the Global South as an entity led by “rising powers” or “Southern giants” or even “emerging middle powers” that are becoming powerful enough to change the rules of the international system, dictated by the North. However, it could be argued that what is rising or emerging is not the South, but a narrative about the South which constitutes some states as Southern states and some dynamics as South-South dynamics.

But what about those states which are not easily encompassed by this narrative not because they are powerless, in the sense of not possessing enough material or ideational “capabilities” to join the club of those who challenge the system; but rather precisely because possessing the material capabilities to challenge the system they choose not to do so? If Namibia is forgiven for its powerlessness will Saudi Arabia be forgiven for its unwillingness?

When Terterov, Vallet and Nocente (2013) say that Saudi Arabia does not belong to the South “given the development levels that the Kingdom has been able to reach with the help of oil incomes” and make it the “the North” of what they call “the Muslim South” they are reproducing the North-South binary to discuss dynamics that are much better explained in terms of South-South power relations. Actually, how can someone question Saudi Arabia’s “location” in the Global South in terms of its economic development? Then what about China? If Saudi Arabia is the Muslim North then China is what – the North of the East? What I am getting at here is that there is no North in the South – because the South is not a place, it is not a thing. If we move past our passion for binaries we can realize that what we are actually dealing with when we speak about the reproduction of North-South relations in the Global South are power relations involved in the constitution of the South.

In this sense, the fact that the *khaleeji* capital (capital from the Gulf) is profit-seeking and that its investments in the Middle East and other Muslim countries come with a whole set of political conditionalities should not obliterate the importance of the established record of South-South cooperation driven by the AGS, especially as far as the role that Arab and Islamic institutions play in promoting development in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Arab official development assistance (ODA), foreign direct investment (FDI), development banks and migration flows belong to the realm of South-South cooperation in the same way that they belong to the realm of South-South power relations. In this context, the relations that have historically been forged on the grounds of Arab or Muslim solidarity can legitimately be framed as South-South cooperation.

If AGS’ foreign policy makers intend to strengthen the role of the South in the international system or if they want to change the rules of the international game is not actually relevant for them to play this role. Intentionality is not a condition for action. The fact is that AGS’s ODA, FDI and remittances from migrant workers strengthen the idea that there are political and economic dynamics that belong to the realm of the South where the North is not part of the equation. Obviously this does not prevent us from understanding that all human behaviour is still structured around the needs of the global capitalism led by the North/West. Well, the South is a discourse that emerged from the waters of capitalism – see how it is framed in terms of investments, capital flows, development banks, transnational infrastructure projects, etc. And when we talk about it, the role played by the AGS can’t be downplayed.

Does the assistance provided for developing countries by Saudi Arabia or the UAE come with contentious and cumbersome political conditionalities? Of course they do and I mostly side with Adam Hanieh (2011) when he says that these conditionalities can be so deleterious that it might be better for Arab countries to get this money elsewhere. Where would this be? In global financial institutions controlled by European and North American capital? It seems that the North is always on call, waiting to step in when things go wrong in the South.

The consolidation of the narrative on the Global South as a political space comprised of rising or emerging (state) powers who challenge the North will relegate to an inferior category within the South those who do not openly question or oppose the North. If left unchallenged, this foundational myth of the South will end up reproducing the forms of exclusion that Arab states and peoples are submitted to within the various realms of IR scholarship. This is, indeed, the greatest theoretical and political challenge of locating the AGS in the South: that the Arab Gulf states do not appear in the emerging Global South narrative only as an example of what is not expected from the South; or only as an example of what the South should not be. Something as a blemish in the otherwise supposed immaculate behaviour of those like China and Russia towards their Southern fellows. We have also to be careful not to reproduce an Orientalist narrative that takes the Saudis for Mohammed bin Salman and the Emiratis for Mohammed bin Zayed. In this regard, Kuwaiti critical voices and Qatari political activists can't be excluded from the narrative of the Global South because the behaviour of their political and economic elites does not always match our expectations of South-South relations as an alternative to North-South relations.

I conclude arguing that we have to find better ways to accommodate Arab Gulf States and peoples in the Global South narrative because if we conceptualize them as driving forces of the South we can frame their ODA, FDI, development banks, labour markets, social movements and political activism as prevailing signifying practices that could make the signifier "South" even more meaningful. This is a complicated – yet necessary – political and intellectual manoeuvre.

References

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