

Gulf and Balkan Relations: A Study of the Two Peninsulas History in comparison to their Potential Cooperation Opportunities

Badar Mohammed Al Mughairi¹, Amal Said Ali Al Mashaykhi²,
Prof. Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim³, Mohammad Imtiaz Hossain⁴

1, 2. PhD Researcher, Binary University of Management & Entrepreneurship, Malaysia

3. Dean, Binary Graduate School, Binary University of Management & Entrepreneurship, Malaysia

4. MSc in Business Economics, University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i3/5777> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i3/5777

Published Date: 27 March 2019

Abstract

This brief article is meant to highlight the significant historical events of the two peninsulas (Arabia and Balkans) that shape their today's. Additionally, it studies the potential cooperation opportunities based on some common aspects, such as economic, security and diplomacy. Although the Gulf countries, already established their own semi-regional organization, appear to be more politically and economically stable, the Balkans are still nowadays fighting for their rights but most importantly their real independence and for the membership for some international and regional organizations. This review paper discusses about the demographic variation besides the economical dependency on each other to foster the economic development.

Keywords: Balkan, Gulf, peninsula, cooperation, economics

Introduction

Peninsulas, being territories partially surrounded by water, are unsurprisingly significant landforms for their regions. Therefore, highlighting any peninsula location, no two would argue the importance of its strategic position on the map especially when it comes to applying the law of the sea over possible related matters. Moreover, peninsulas are usually wealthy with natural resources such as oil, a thing that added extreme economic value to these types of territories.

Globally, the biggest well-known peninsula is the Arabian Peninsula which consists of the six Gulf cooperation council (GCC) countries (put in alphabetical order): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE), in addition to Yemen. The GCC appeals to the International relations eyes as a pearl among its neighbors. Since 1981, when the GCC was first established, and its membership was given to the six states that form the council, some of the GCC objectives have partly or almost exclusively met where other failed. The

fourth article in the GCC charter indicates these fundamental objectives, such as: to effect coordination, integration, and interconnection between the state members, to deepen the relations among the six countries, and to formulate regulations in various fields:

On the other hand, and a little bit far away from Arabia, Europe as a continent is recognized, by some writers, as a peninsula of peninsulas. Where the Balkan, a geographical peninsula area within Europe (placed in southeast Europe), is located in the very southeastern part of Europe. The Balkan Peninsula is including the following states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, and the European part of Turkey.

Historical Background

The Gulf geographical area was under the control of exterior enemies which somehow influenced the gulf people normal daily life (Commins, 2012). Moreover, the Oil Revolution is the most highlighted event through the historical timeline of the gulf area, in such way the area woke up for a sudden and appeared to become a target for many external colonizers and power countries at that time. The explorations of oil engrossed foreign companies which work in some mutual agreement with the Gulf, and hence wealth factor worked the best for the region from development and economic aspects. As a result, economic conflicts occurred later within the region and even included some external parties.

Meanwhile, the Balkans went through a rigid timing and bloody history. The peninsula did not seem to have its own dependency till very recently. For example, the Roman Empire annexed the region for centuries (some resources convey that Roman period in the Balkans area has started in the 2nd century BC whereas others indicate it was officially happened in the 1st century). Later, in the middle age, the Byzantine Empire took over the control in the region for almost 7 centuries. According to history books, it was around the century 14th or century 15th when the Balkans was under the Ottoman Empire rule. All of this shows the variety of ethnicity and religious empires that governed the peninsula up until the beginning of the 20th century. The multi-ethnic cultural nature of the region might be the reason behind putting the peninsula into kind of long lasting conflict. Although it is not really the topic of this brief article, yet it is important to highlight that even in, or after the 20th century the peninsula did not steadily rest for enough while. There were two big conflicts in the region, mainly known as the Balkan wars (1912-nearly 1914). One was against the Ottoman Empire where the second involved the initial spark that lighted the First World War (WWI). Nevertheless, the Balkan Peninsula appeared to not have enough major war up until the cold war, that it's former Yugoslavia (Yugoslavia was first formed as a kingdom in 1918 and later declared as socialist state after WWII) federation decided to go for 'national stereotypes' civil war in 1991 (Hayden, 2012) not knowing, most likely, that this will end up its existence in the world map.

Generally, the relations between the two mentioned regions above were real throughout the cold war era, since both were involved in the non-aligned movement at that time plus mutual trade existed between the regions since it appeared that some Yugoslav workers were based in the Arabia. However, it gives the impression; both the Gulf and the Balkans were busy with some inner conflicts and war era within their own geographically territories during the century 20th that strong and direct relations were not valid but in very minority of events like the Bosnia and Herzegovina independence in 1992.

Below, are two war eras that the Gulf and Balkan suffered from. Since the horrific war and dispute circumstances were less on the Gulf side than in Balkans, taking in consideration the GCC region wealth and power too, GCC probably was able to initiate, sometime by the end of the same century, a bright startup of what comes later to be a strong cooperation and influence era with the Balkan states, as will be detailed further in this report.

Firstly, the Gulf War occurred when Iraq decided to invade Kuwait in 1990 for the purpose of gaining the oil reserve in order to cut off a debt unsettled for the Kuwait favor and to increase the power of the state of Iraq over the region. On the second day of the invasion Iraqi forces were asked to leave Kuwait, and for no positive response on regard, not only gulf but the international arena were facing this conflict that may affect the oil international market. An operation called, Operation Desert Shield as into action as an implementation of the anti-Iraq coalition. Saddam, the Iraqi president, still refused to withdraw from Kuwait, which caused on an immediate action by the coalition. Iraqi forces were defeated weeks later, and Kuwait was announced free on February 1991.

On the other hand, the former Yugoslavia federation was going through long frightful dispute era, late 20th century, till its dissolution in 2001. Drawing the Yugoslavia ending time line, it might be all started in Slovenia, where almost all Slovenian population of the Yugoslavia was staying; an independence appeal was stated in 1991. Conversely, Serbs and Croat were not really satisfied; mainly as their nation were not living in their state-lands. Hence, Croatian independence war was next which lasted from 1991 and for over 4 years. In parallel, the horrific Bosnian war took place between 1992 up till 1995 by Bosnian greedy neighbors, Serbs and Croats. Even though some parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina were declared as UN safe haven (BBC, 1993) the area shifted to be 'death traps' as stated by the Bosnian head of state, Ali Izetbegovic. The Bosnian capital, yet announced safe haven was attacked in 1994 by Serbs and huge number of Muslims were murdered in a dreadful massacre in the European history. Three years after the ending of the tragedy Bosnian war, another battle took place in the Balkan region. Kosovo war began in 1998 and did not end but with the Kuma novo agreement being set in 1999. NATO has intervened twice; once in an operation in 1995 that was conducted to undercut the military actions going on the safe haven 'safe area' declared by the United Nations (UN) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A second NATO involvement was in 1999 in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, at that time, Serbia and Kosovo.

Ethnicity and Religions

Nations in the Balkans are seen to be segregated into three main categories; Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs and Bosnian Muslims (Hayden, 2012). Since, this report is to highly emphasis the common aspects between the Balkan region and the Gulf, and because the majority of populations in the GCC are Muslims whereas all the gulf states are ruled by Muslim governments, this part of the brief research is focusing on the Islamic background and some related events within the relationships between the two regions.

Islam is not a new religious in the Balkans area, as the peninsula was introduced to this peaceful religious since it is foundation back in history (Csaszar, 2010) However, it is rare that the Muslims in the Gulf region and the Balkan Muslims share language or any cultural aspect. Due to the heavy schoolwork on the topic of terrorism and 'Mujahedeen' and Islamist movements' involvement after the occurrence of September the 11th attack; it has been revealed that external mujahedeen forces were used in the Bosnian war (1992-1995) and

were sustained with different aspects by Saudi Islamic organizations and donations centers (Boduszyński, 2005). As a result, over a dozen of Islamic charities supported by Saudi Arabia are shut down by the Bosnian authority as well as in Kosovo. Most unusual interestingly events happened when the first religious man within the Kosovo Islamic community, describing the Saudi charities and Mujahedeen contribution as “people who want to teach us how we ought to do things”, indicated that his people have been Muslims for over half a century and are in no need of a foreign Islamic party to direct them (Schwartz, 2002).

Furthermore, under the circumstance of Muslim cleansing in the Balkans, Bin Laden was calling for an Arabs and Muslims action against the massacre taking place in the Bosnia and Herzegovina, by saying “For several years our brothers have been killed, our women have been raped, and our children have been massacred in the safe havens of the United Nations (Ibid). Yet, because of some Balkans Muslims position, in favor of the United States and its war on terrorism strategy, Bin Laden was seen no difference, by Balkans states especially Albania, than Milosevic. Likewise the Bosnian reaction towards the Saudi supported foundations in its lands, other Balkan states have distanced themselves from the Arabia region and the Middle East in general, fearing of terrorism or any possible suspicious events which may result in affecting the relations with powerful western states or abolishing the Balkan states willing to join NATO or European Union (Boduszyński, 2005).

In general, those who would study the history of the Balkans will be able to conclude that many of the disputes and wars happened in the past day of the region, were directly or somehow based on religious and ethnicity. Nevertheless, in the present day, Islam is positively escalating in some parts of the Balkan Peninsula, where Islam considers as an identity for at least a portion of the population. Muslims in the Balkan are considered to be about half of the total Muslims number in the whole Europe (Csaszar, 2010). Official statistics conducted in 2008, showed that Islam is found in ten countries, where Albania is the one with highest number of Muslim living in (over half of the Muslims population in the Balkan Peninsula). Bosnia and Herzegovina came second on the top ten list of countries where Balkans Muslims are in. On the other hand, Serbia, as expected was last in the list with just three percent as proportion on Muslims in the region (Ibid)

Foreign Affairs

Foreign affairs are vital connection between States within the international arena. It reflected into all other aspects like development, military, economic and cooperation. Gulf region and the Balkan Peninsula have been both into many historical events, yet there are currently many common factors and mutual interest among them. Religious and ethnicity assist through the time to start up cooperation and good relations among the two parties, yet it has been approved that it failed sometimes due to misconception or fear, as discussed earlier. Cooperation and influence between the two regions are to be highlighted later, as its more into economic and developments sides. From diplomacy point of view, Gulf States have recognized some of the declared Balkan states independence, for instance Kosovo when declared independence in 2008 almost all Gulf States recognized it in front of the international arena. Moreover, today there are Balkans embassies found in some of the Gulf countries, like the Bosnian embassy in Saudi Arabia and the Serbian embassy in UAE.

Greater Albania is a concept that known in the Balkan, especially for the Albanian who are fighting to get unified. Scholar founds indicated that the GCC model is interesting and

important for the Albanian to follow in order to achieve a political and economic satisfaction (Yenigun, n.d) This will be described in further later.

Cooperation and Influence

Despite the unpromising part of the shared history or mistaken misconceptions between and about the two peninsulas, the present seems to be more brightening over the two regions. And further cooperation among the Gulf and the Balkans is bringing up great opportunities in variety of fields for the good of the both nations.

Recently, carried out Islamic dialogues and economic bonds, as shown earlier in this report, between the two peninsulas were started to be stronger than it used to be. In terms of influence, there are a modest number of indications. For example, and beyond geopolitical interest, Qatari owned international media firm, Al Jazeera, was established for the Balkan region. Today, Al Jazeera Balkans station is based in Sarajevo, the capital of the Bosnia and Herzegovina. A thing that influence and indirectly affect the public opinion in the Balkans region, where the Al Jazeera Balkans is broadcasting news in local languages for six hours a day and is shifting then to the Al Jazeera English programme but with subtitles offered for the locals. This media strategy is easing the relations between the two parties and eliminating any possible against-gulf propaganda within the region, since Al Jazeera is owned by Qatar and its allies. Wither if al Jazeera Balkans has approved to decrees the gap between the Gulf and the Balkans efficiently or not, media is always a way to draw the public opinion path especially if it was customized to the local linguistic and culturally acceptance.

From Islamic community based cooperation aspect, the GCC (majorly Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) have assisted some Balkan areas like Bosnia and a number of mosques funded by some Gulf States like Saudi Arabia are providing an Islamic harmony environment as well as a place to rise up social and multiethnic norms. However, this occurred to make, intentionally or not so, a division among Muslims in the Balkans; in such way not many Muslims in the region were, any longer, accepting the assistance from Saudi Arabia or mainly the Gulf, whereas others were segregating themselves from other Muslims. Since the Balkans, by the end of the day, is part of Europe and, as discussed earlier, fears the Islamist terrorism attacks especially after the September 11th event and the recent existence of what is called ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or “Daesh”. Besides, studies show that the Salafi Muslim community is taking violent approach, and, somehow, such gulf foundations with the current circumstances might assist them going wider. Regardless of the segregation among Muslims as indirect result, probably, of the Saudi social and Islamic ideological intervention in the Balkans, the economic bounds between the Gulf and the Balkan region have notably improved since 2011. In instance, based on Reuters, a group of investors from Saudi Arabia have dedicated their capital (of about half billion) to infrastructure development plans in the Balkan¹. Two years later, Qatar has started an economic cooperation committed with Macedonia², where just recently, in 2015, the head of the two states met and discussed, in front of the public media, a legal structure of Qatari investments in different grounds such as; agriculture and telecommunication.

Beyond economic, UAE has started a major cooperation and a partnership opportunity with the Serbian government in security, military and intelligence organizations. Most surprising that the UAE supported the NATO campaign against Serbia in 1999 (Karasik, 2013) Nevertheless all was decided to be forgotten, and a new history page was opened with the visit of Mohammad bin Zayid, the crown prince of UAE capital and deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, to Serbia where he met the Serbian president in Belgrade in 2013. A year later, according to UAE government news, UAE has extended its cooperation with Serbia in the Balkans to include an airline industry partnership. All of this shows the importance of the investment, national interests and economic impact over ethno-conflict history.

A different vision could be seen as an influence by the gulf area over the Balkans, especially for the sake of Albanians, is through the nature of the gulf cooperation council. Albanians are still dreaming to get their claimed 'Greater Albania' where an economic and political based control entity, formed by least; Albania, Kosovo and portion of Macedonia, is to amalgamate this entity originator and allow the Albanians to deserve a membership in the European Union. The people in the gulf countries are almost sharing similar, if not same, history, religious, culture, and social norms. They all do speak the same language, have common heritage and mutual interest within the region. From a macro sight, the world are looking at the gulf as a united economic power, where the GCC serves the region as intergovernmental organizations for defined countries. Likely, the 'Great Albania' thought, is based on a unification of Albanian in the Balkan Peninsula from social, culture, beliefs, ethnic and identity aspects, but most importantly economic and political reflection into the unification of Albanians. Hence, the GCC is structuring a good fair example for the Albanians, at least, that they could use in their case to empower their position. To sum that all up, the Gulf involvement within the Balkans, since the end of the cold war, have created promising cooperation opportunities for both party, with which, the former mentioned has influenced and or invested in the later. However, not all involvement is seen to be helpful for the development and recovery of the Balkan Peninsula.

Conclusion

The two peninsulas, Arabia and the Balkan, are very critical and significantly important to their regions. Hence, they both faced eras of conflicts and wars. Although the Gulf countries, already established their own semi-regional organization, appear to be more politically and economically stable, the Balkans are still nowadays fighting for their rights but most importantly their real independence and for the membership for some international and regional organizations like EU and NATO. From historical aspect, both were suffering due to not only the importance of their geographically location but for other factors like economic and religious. However, a one cannot miss that both were, at some point of very ancient historical time, having a rich religious and cultural backgrounds. Like when it comes to the Gulf countries, there is 'Majan' and 'Mazoon' civilization era which shaped Oman nowadays in the gulf map. There was also 'Dilmoon' which involved Bahrain and some parts of Kuwait and Qatar today. All Majan, Mazoon and Dilmoon were considered very significant trading centers that crossed the Persian Gulf routes out to the entire world. Saudi Arabia today, was one day the place where Islam has started which gave the area a great reputation as the Islamic historical empire. Moving to the Balkan Peninsula, the area is greatly diverse from the aspect of who was controlling it. So, in the middle age, there was the, Roman, Byzantine "Eastern

Roman" Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. This diversity has reflected into the Balkans life style, culture, ethnicity and religious disruptions over the peninsula, plus even the infrastructure of their countries. This made both regions common on historical part, yet, more interestingly, Balkans has over half the percentage of Muslims population in Europe. A thing that created an opportunity to share also a religious and ethnic aspect with the gulf countries where the majority is Muslims and all gulf countries are rolled by Muslims governments.

Investments and common interest based agreements between the Gulf States and the Balkan Peninsula is encouraged. Influence could take place in different shapes starting from culture and media all the way too political and army racing cooperation. Although cooperation is already on place between some Gulf States (with an involvements of MNCs too), the process should have been more strategized as a long mechanism. Hence, Four D- factors should be taken in consideration; Defense, Development, Diplomacy but most importantly Dialogue. The latest could be approached through many activities and/or strategic methodologies like; education, Islamic cooperation, youth programs within the Balkans itself and for Balkans and Gulfs too. Regional organizations (like Organization of Islamic cooperation) and individuals plus NGOs involvements is highly welcomed and encouraged, since Muslims need to unite once again and that would not be real if the upcoming new generations are not well prepared. Martin Luther King once said: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends", and the new generations of Muslims should be friends who take no silence position any more towards each other's rights for brightest Islamic future.

Balkans and Gulfs accession process contributed to changing its foreign policy tools as it started using economic and cultural soft power instruments to a greater extent. This article reviewed that there are four main demographic variations of Balkan-Arab policies: focus on religion and history, ignoring perceptions and misperceptions of Ethnicity actors; Cooperation and Influence on economic development. It is also shown that those actors are not smooth may benefit from the instrumentalisation of countries policy's tools and discourses, but they can benefit from it for their own interests. It also showed how ties with of both collaboration were used in region's policies by the policy-makers.

Corresponding Author

Name: Mohammad Imtiaz Hossain

Address: Faculty of Economics and Management, UPM. 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Personal Email: imtiazhossain677@gmail.com

Institutional Email: gs53627@student.upm.edu.my

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