

Talal M. Almutairi and Dean Kruckeberg (Eds.), **Public Relations in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: An Arab Perspective**, 2019, New York, NY: Routledge, 152 pp., \$39.16 (paperback).

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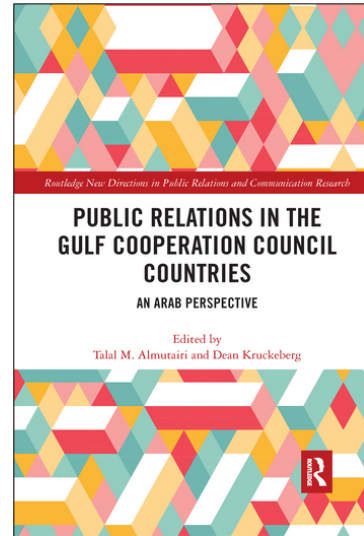
From both academic and practical points of view, it is timely to see a publication on public relations (PR) in the Gulf region. PR has historical roots but is a 20th-century phenomenon. As reflected in academic debates, the global financial crisis of 2008 has been a reason why many organizations of the Gulf region realized that they “were totally unprepared for the fallout and impact on their image and realized that advertisements and old marketing tools could simply not keep up with the magnitude of damage control needed” (Zaki, 2017, para. 2).

Besides that, it has been necessary for the survival of organizations in the region to open doors to new communication and business initiatives to sustain themselves. For example, it is not unusual for the Gulf to be famous for its oil revenue, but building an image through PR was a new experience, indirectly convincing the world that the region cared about knowledge and developed communication methods as well. These needs pushed the region’s countries to take PR more seriously and invest in academic disciplines and capacity building for private and governmental organizations. Although significant efforts have been made in this area over the past two decades, there are still few studies on this topic. **Public Relations in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: An Arab Perspective**, edited by Talal M. Almutairi and Dean Kruckeberg, is a promising effort to highlight the background of PR in the region and update scholars on recent progress in this field.

The book is a collection of articles on PR practices within those countries categorized as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Public Relations Society of America defines PR as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (de Bussy, 2013, p. 84). Since the discovery of oil, most businesses in GCC countries have developed contacts with international companies. Therefore, evolving PR as a communication tool can promote the reputation of GCC companies both domestically and internationally.

Public Relations in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries consists of eight chapters on PR in GCC countries. The authors of chapters on PR in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are assistant professors, professors, and lecturers in the respective countries. The book presents extensive information on PR theories, including studies on strategic public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2000) and professionalization (Larson, 1979), and studies on PR in the Gulf countries by Arab



writers, exploring the historical background of and communication methods that have been recently used in GCC countries. Sociocultural issues, such as gender attitudes, education progress, and social relationships shaped by Islamic values and media developments are among some of the influencing factors of PR in the region, which are also discussed in the book. The book's analyses are partly built on literature reviews, interviews, and survey questionnaires, reflecting the opinions of PR practitioners, experts, and academics.

The book refers to PR problems, such as weaknesses in communication, language, and presentation skills, in the case of Bahrain; gaps in strategic and decision making abilities in the case of Kuwait; and the need for improving, organizing, and conducting communication campaigns, in the case of Oman. Regarding Qatar, it is remarkable to read that the country does not have "leading public relations organizations" (p. 92), despite having well-known education centers and media organizations like *Aljazeera* that play a key role in building a cultural image for the country. The main challenges of PR in Saudi Arabia are also mentioned, including a lack of "specialists and trained public relations practitioners" (p. 104). The UAE's PR practices are presented as successful. The PR practices are extended within "a mix of local and international expertise" that offers "strategic and tactical services to the public and private sectors" (p. 139). The modern approach to PR, according to Badran A. Badran in chapter 7, flourishes through "a transformed public sector, a thriving private sector, local and multinational agencies, professional associations and tertiary education," and institutions like the Dubai-based Middle East Public Relations Association are actively updating PR definitions and practices (p. 129).

Public Relations in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries reviews the histories of the countries' PR origins, and discusses how PR courses were established in GCC universities, such as the Kuwait University and the private Gulf University for Science and Technology beginning to offer degree programs in PR in 2006 (p. 43).

There are several strengths of the book. First, the book fills the gap in the literature concerning PR in Arab countries by concentrating on GCC countries. Second, it presents academic debates among Arab writers on the topic of PR. With reference to Arabic sources, the book provides a picture of PR-related Arabic language debates for English-speaking readers (e.g., Al-Qamshoi, 2015, and AlSaqer & Al-Rashed, 2018, as cited in the text). Third, it highlights sociocultural PR factors, such as the involvement of women in Bahrain's PR, which reflects the reduction of gender-based stereotypes in Bahraini society during the last two decades (p. 12). Fourth, it presents original research on historic communication spaces as the basis of modern PR. For instance, in the case of Kuwait's Al-Safat (a historical commercial square in Kuwait city that was a place of decision making), Suq (a hive of social and commercial activity), Sahel (port), Farji (a social space between neighbors), Gahwat (coffee shop), Diwaniya (reception area) and Al-Nadi Al-Adabi (a literary club) are spaces that are described "as influential spaces for communication and for forming public opinion" (pp. 37–38).

Despite offering new information on PR, the book also has some weaknesses. First, each chapter of the book separately deals with particular theories and relevant studies, but the information provided in the chapters sometimes overlaps. Second, the methodologies of some of the chapters are not presented clearly, putting their validity in question. For instance, in the chapter on Bahrain, Layla Alsaqer and Sama'a Al Hashimi aim to measure the range of PR skills practitioners use in performing coordination, media,

production, research, and marketing functions. To reach this goal, PR practitioners were asked through a survey how they “indicate the association between the type of function performed by their company” (p. 21). The results of the survey theoretically can reflect what those PR practitioners “think” or consider “ideal,” but it is not able to measure the practitioners’ skills. Third, some chapters mention social factors that shape PR but fail to develop these points. For instance, input on democratization and freedom of speech in the chapters on Kuwait and Qatar are highly relevant to PR. This could open doors to better understanding that PR is not just a practice to be constructed based on science and skills, but also develops through interaction within society. A democratic society can prepare better PR dynamics through giving opportunities to hear voices and ideas of multiple groups. Yazeed Abdullah Almahraj also provides an interesting perspective on the role of religion in Saudi Arabia’s public spaces, though he failed to discuss “how” (e.g., through media outreach or decision-making skills) religion shapes the PR in Saudi Arabia.

The book also often refers to the Gulf as the “Arab Gulf.” Nevertheless, in historic maps, such as *Maps of Arabia* (Library of Congress, 1654) and *Arabian Peninsula and Vicinity* (Central Intelligence Agency, 1984), the Gulf uniformly is referred to as the “Persian Gulf.” Moreover, UNESCO confirmed in 2004 that “according to existing documents in the UN the water way between Arabia Peninsula and Iran is called the Persian Gulf” (Abdi, 2008, p. 208). Using the term “Arab Gulf” might reflect the nationalistic views of some of the book’s authors; however, it also indicates that Routledge supports use of the term. The polite approach of using both terms—“Arab” and “Persian” Gulf—in different Routledge publications only escalates the Gulf naming dispute. Despite this, however, the book offers a substantive contribution to the literature on PR in Arab countries.

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