

The Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States: Size, Power, and Regime Stability in the Middle East

Máté Szalai,

Routledge, 1st Edition, 2023, ISBN: 978-036-774-525-7, p. 250.

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Received: 23.10.2024 | Accepted: 20.06.2025

Körfez'in Küçük Devletlerinin Dış Politikası: Ortadoğu'da Büyüklük, Güç ve Rejim İstikrarı

Máté Szalai,

Routledge, 1. Baskı, 2019, ISBN: 978-113-833-100-6, s. 314.

Değerlendirmeyi Yapan: Ali Utaybi**

Geliş Tarihi: 23.10.2024 | Kabul Tarihi: 20.06.2025

السياسة الخارجية لدول الخليج الصغيرة: الحجم والقوة واستقرار الأنظمة في الشرق الأوسط

ماتي زالاي

دار روتليدج للنشر، الطبعة الأولى، 2023، ISBN: 978-036-774-525-7، 250 صفحة.

المراجع: صالح قايا***

تاريخ الاستلام: 20.10.2024 | تاريخ القبول: 20.06.2025

Introduction

The Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States: Size, Power and Regime Stability in the Middle East by Máté Szalai, explores how smaller Gulf states, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have enhanced their influence in the Middle East by leveraging their small size as a foreign policy asset. The book introduces a theoretical framework called the “complex model of size,” which examines how smallness’s material and perceptual aspects impact power, identity, regime stability, and international leverage. Despite being considered secondary to larger powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, these smaller states have played significant roles

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in regional politics, particularly during the Gulf wars, the Arab Spring, the Gulf rift, and the Abraham Accords.

Summary and Analysis

Consisting of six chapters plus a conclusion, this 228-page book covers topics such as the foreign policy of small states, small state theory and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, relative, normative, absolute, and perpetual size of smaller Gulf states, as well as their foreign and security policy history, and the age of regional uncertainty (2011-2021). In providing an overview of the essential components of this book, Chapter 1 begins by presenting a quadrant model to categorize the four dimensions of the Complex Model of Size (CMS), encompassing material, ideational, individual, and structural aspects of state size. One area that Szalai particularly emphasizes is the internal level of analysis. Then the author provides more detail about two of these dimensions (absolute and perpetual) in Chapter 4. This creates a sense of cohesion throughout the chapters. Among Szalai's key contributions is the notion of 'perceptual size,' which is featured in the ideational-individual quadrant and explores how a state formulates its self-identity. In addition, the author discusses 'absolute size' in the material-individual quadrant, which is the second key aspect of the CMS. Absolute size assesses how material capabilities contribute to the actual power of smaller states. Szalai examines territorial, demographic, economic, and military resource availability and distribution among the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The book then systematically explores land area, climate conditions, hydrocarbon reserves, and labor market characteristics. Finally, to investigate intra-Gulf differences, Szalai conducts a discourse analysis of 1,175 United Nations Security Council speeches, uncovering varying tendencies among Gulf officials in articulating their states' sizes. This analysis serves as the foundation for the remainder of the book and enriches the broader discussion on the concept of size.

In Chapter 2, Szalai argues that, contrary to common belief, several factors enable small states in the MENA to wield greater influence than their size would imply. The region functions as a distinct security complex within the broader global political and economic system, and understanding the evolving regional balance of power – alongside specific state models and conflict norms in MENA – reveals how these factors benefit smaller states. Traditional armed conflicts are discouraged due to prevailing regime structures, Arab solidarity, power diffusion, and the involvement of external and non-state actors. Moreover, resource-scarce states can adopt low-cost strategies

similar to those used by larger states, such as leveraging non-state actors, capitalizing on Arab or Islamic solidarity, and intervening frequently in each other's domestic affairs. These current power dynamics not only enhance the leverage of smaller states but also contribute to a reduced sense of security – driven more by regime political dynamics and their unique characteristics than by state size itself.

While Chapter 3 provides a basic overview of the calculation of relative size, it is in Chapter 4 that Szalai delves into significantly more detail, specifically regarding absolute and perpetual size. The focus then shifts to Chapter 5, which covers the period from 1968 to 2011, with Szalai concentrating on the “relative” size dimension. The other three components of the CMS receive less emphasis in the second half of the book. During the 1970s and 1980s, the smaller GCC states maintained consistent defensive policies, aligning themselves with the U.S. in the 1990s. However, following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, their approaches began to diverge.

Finally, the last chapter, Chapter 6 examines the period from 2011 to 2021, focusing on how smaller GCC states navigated threats and opportunities through “compensatory policies.” The chapter argues that, in response to the Arab Spring protests, Bahrain sought military support from the GCC – particularly from Saudi Arabia – to mitigate its vulnerabilities. Oman leveraged its normative smallness to facilitate dialogue between the U.S. and Iran, as well as between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. Meanwhile, Qatar and the UAE pursued forms of normative “enlargement”: Qatar supported regional Islamist networks, while the UAE actively opposed them. The key takeaway is that states with similar positions in the international system can adopt markedly different foreign policy strategies.

Conclusion and Critique

The CMS model that Szalai presents is useful; however, concerns can be raised about the tendency to generalize the Gulf states in the way he does. By connecting the CMS exclusively to the Gulf region, Szalai gains a sense of analytical control, as similar cultures and scenarios prevail within this area. Yet, the way the CMS is framed suggests that the “smallness” of the Gulf states is a uniquely regional phenomenon, despite the existence of comparable regional systems elsewhere – particularly in Europe. Additionally, there is a tendency in Szalai's analysis to overgeneralize the Gulf states. While theoretical models can offer valuable insights, they have limits in predicting future developments. Szalai often focuses only on discussions that align

with his narrative, which limits a more comprehensive account of the foreign policy variations across different Gulf states.

Secondly, Szalai displays considerable bias in his concluding remarks. Specifically, in the book's conclusion, Qatar is labelled a "failure," with the assertion that "the moment of Qatar has arguably passed" (p. 225). Given Qatar's foreign policy decisions and its active role during the Arab Spring, this conclusion is debatable, and a strong counterargument could be made against Szalai's interpretation. This links back to Szalai's choice of discourse analysis methods. While the sample size is appropriate, discourse analysis does not provide scientific answers to questions, and it is inherently subjective. Moreover, when thinking about the texts that Szalai would have used, it is very likely that bias also appeared in the primary literature used during the data collection and analysis process. Discourse analysis is not a flawed method; rather, the book could have been strengthened through further discussions of the limitations of the approach, rather than proclaiming definitive findings.

Despite these limitations, the book follows a clear and logical structure. It reads like a significantly expanded journal article, guiding the reader through the background, followed by the methodology for calculating relative size, and then presenting findings and a conclusion in the later chapters. This logical progression is also reflected in the accessible language, with vocabulary that suits a broad audience, making the book useful for a wide range of readers, including both specialists in the field and newcomers alike.