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Her Excellency, Not His: Gulf Women Breaking Diplomatic Tradition

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Introduction

“It used to be,” soon-to-be secretary of state Madeleine K. Albright [said](#) in 1996, “that the only way a woman could truly make her foreign policy views felt was by marrying a diplomat and then pouring tea on an offending ambassador's lap.” That was a huge statement reflecting challenges, barriers and stereotypes faced by women in the world of diplomacy.

In the past, when a diplomat or any high-level official, such as a parliamentarian or a bureaucrat, is to be mentioned, often one pictured a man due to the hegemonic masculinity of decision-making processes of states.

Historically, diplomacy was one of the areas preserved for men and excluded from women. The appointment of women to diplomatic posts, especially at an ambassadorship level, were highly undesirable due to prejudices, cultural norms and a variety of misguided reasons related to the nature of the job that typically involves frequent assignments overseas

However, since the 2000s, women have started to assume pioneering roles in diplomacy with increasing number of women becoming ambassadors overseas, breaking the

glass ceiling that they have been facing for a very long time. The ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) of some states have even reached a gender parity among their diplomats. These developments are in themselves considered a dramatic change in the world of diplomacy, which was traditionally a “male domain.” In recent years, this change has started to show its visibility in the Gulf context as well.

Past, Present, and Future of Women in Gulf Diplomacy

In December 1993, Nabeela al-Mulla made history when she [became](#) the first woman from Kuwait and from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to serve as an ambassador abroad. She was also the first Arab woman to serve as Permanent Representative to the United Nations, becoming a role model for women in the region. Her appointment trailblazed a rise in the number of women diplomats in Kuwait, and in the wider region. In 1998, this trend was [followed](#) by Oman with the appointment of Khadija Al-Lawati as the first women ambassador to the Netherlands. A year later, Hunaina Al-Mughairy was [appointed](#) as the ambassador to the US in 1999,

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reflecting Sultan Qaboos' vision of empowering Omani women in diplomacy. Al-Mughairy represented Oman for nearly 15 years in Washington. Same year, Bahrain also appointed its [first-ever](#) women ambassador, Sheikha Haya Rashed al-Khalifa, to another key position, France.

Since the 2000s, the number of women diplomats assuming ambassadorial ranks steadily increased in the GCC states, which has given priority to boosting the presence and the level of activity of women in foreign policy. This new trend started to leave a mark on the execution of Gulf foreign policy.

This year, Kuwait [appointed](#) Sheikha Al Zain Al Sabah, a film producer and former undersecretary of the Ministry of State for Youth Affairs, as the new ambassador to the United States, a critical state for the Gulf country. Currently, Kuwait's embassy in Canada – a country that hosts the majority of women ambassadors and follows a quite impressive gender balance in ambassadorial level in the foreign policy - is also [run](#) by a women ambassador, Reem Mohammad Khaled Zaid Al Khaled.

As of 2023, Qatar also has four women ambassadors in top diplomatic missions. Two of them serve in [Indonesia](#) and [Sweden](#), while the other two serve as permanent representatives at the United Nations in [New York](#) and [Geneva](#). While this insight was in progress, Lolwah R M Al-Khater, who

was previously the spokesperson of the Qatari MFA and later the assistant foreign minister, was [appointed](#) as the Minister of state for International Cooperation at the Qatari MFA.

Among the GCC states, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have the greatest number of women holding ambassadorial ranks. According to [Women in Diplomacy Index 2023](#), the percentage of Emirati women ambassadors rose to 12.5%, and Saudi Arabia women ambassadors rose to 5%, which was 0% just five years ago.

As of 2023, Saudi Arabia has [five women ambassadors](#) representing the kingdom at key positions abroad. With the onset of this year, Riyadh raised the number of ambassadors in the diplomatic service with the [appointment](#) of Haifa al-Jadea to the European Union (EU) and Nisreen al-Shibel to Finland. Moreover, women ambassadors are in charge of posts in the US, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. Reema bint Bandar Al Saud became Saudi Arabia's [first female ambassador](#) in 2019 when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in his role as the King's deputy, issued a royal decree appointing her as the Kingdom's ambassador to the US. Her father, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, had also served as the country's ambassador to the US from 1983 to 2005.

The UAE follows a similar pattern with a rising number of women ambassadors at key capitals around the

world such as Paris, Washington, and even at the UN in New York. Currently nearly 10 women ambassadors serve in critical posts, ranging from Europe to North Africa, from the US to Australia. Emirati female diplomats [consider](#) this as a “unique path that draws a national strategy” supporting women’s empowerment. Emirati female diplomats [represented](#) more than half of the team that led the UAE’s membership in the Security Council for the period 2022-2023.

In Bahrain, women comprise a record-breaking one-third of Bahrain’s MFA personnel, having women ambassadors who [served](#) in important posts. There are several outstanding examples of the presence of women in Bahrain’s diplomacy. In Oman, as of 2023, more than 45 percent of Omani diplomats representing the country abroad are women, [according](#) to Zainab Al Qasbi, Head of the Diplomatic institute at the Omani MFA, which was established in 1991.

Driving Forces Behind Empowering Women in Gulf Diplomacy

The generational change in the leaderships in the GCC states has played an important role in this positive transformation, giving wider room for women representation in diplomatic ranks. In recent years, the GCC leaderships, along with their ambitious and transformative Vision plans, has made a tremendous stride to empower

women in their countries. This trend is a reflection of two interrelated phenomena. The GCC states have increased the number of their diplomatic missions in the past decade, in particular after the Arab uprisings, in order to have a more active and influential foreign policy. In addition, the shifting dynamics in the world of diplomacy pushed them to accelerate efforts in creating a positive image of themselves internationally. Giving importance to youth employment and women empowerment has become one of the key focuses of the GCC states and this has been reflected in several areas, including diplomacy. Thus, the top-down attention to boost women representation in diplomacy and the extensive media attention to the several newly appointed women ambassadors has not come as a surprise.

Secondly, the trend of increasing the number of women working in MFAs is parallel with the increase in the labor force participation rate of women in the GCC states in general. The presence of Gulf women in the labor market is [increasing](#) and there is a growing number of women than men in higher education, and women generally [outperform](#) men. For instance, as of 2023, the Saudi General Authority for Statistics [stated](#) that the participation rate in the labor force of Saudi women reached 37 percent, while the ratio of employed Saudi women to the population grew to 29.4 percent. Finally yet importantly, in light of the

leadership's support and empowerment of women, the gradual change in the cultural mindset is also playing a key role in the women's presence in the men-dominated fields.

Stereotypes and Challenges Against Women in Gulf Diplomacy

Although women are currently solidly represented in the MFAs of the GCC states, there are still significant barriers and challenges remain. Not only unique to the Gulf region, in the worldwide there are still very few women who reach highest diplomatic positions, such as ambassadorial, while many remain underrepresented in ambassadorship positions across the world. Various factors exclude women from the diplomatic arena; such as traditional gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and overt discriminatory practices of foreign policy institutions.

In diplomatic tradition, ambassadorial positions have diverse importance and weight. Such as being an ambassador in a state of high significance to the home state generally carries more status. Existing scholarships and a clear look to the posts of the women ambassadors of the GCC states points to gender patterns in diplomacy. That is, women are less likely to be posted to politically and economically fragile states, while they are more likely to be posted to gender-equal states. The women ambassadors of Gulf countries are mostly posted to

either Nordic states, or the UN positions. Washington is an exception, which is a post where Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have appointed women ambassadors. Another stereotype was related to the marriage, which played a decisive part in opening or shutting doors to women in diplomacy. The taboo was that women who wanted to be diplomats could not get married due to the perceived women role in the society and household.

Conclusion

There is a change but also continuity in the gendered politics of diplomacy. MFAs in the GCC states need to build a good bureaucratic record of empowering female ambassadors and female high-level bureaucrats, in compliance with their Visions, as diplomatic work is no longer the monopoly of men.

About the author

Sinem Cengiz is a Research Assistant in Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University, and also a PhD Candidate at Area Studies Department of Middle East Technical University. She is the author of the book titled "Turkish-Saudi Relations: Cooperation and Competition in the Middle East" published by Gerlach Press in 2020, and a regular columnist for Saudi newspaper Arab News since 2016. Her research interests are Turkey-GCC relations, internal and foreign policy nexus in the Gulf region.

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