

# Gulf Cooperation Council Countries and the Global Land Grab

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*A rapid increase in large-scale land acquisitions associated with the food-commodity price spike in 2008 resulted in a flurry of journalistic, non-governmental organization, and academic publications. One of the primary narratives that emerged was that oil-rich Gulf states were driving a “land grab” from resource-poor countries. However, little was known about who was making deals and where. This article assesses the extent to which the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are, in fact, primary players. We first compare the total number of deals and land areas involved, finding that individual GCC member states have been relatively minor players compared to the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Singapore, and Malaysia—each of whom, moreover, finalized more deals than all the GCC countries put together. We next compare the geographic distribution of acquisitions, comparing the trends for GCC member states with those of the major investing countries, and assess which countries have acquired land from the most financially constrained nations. We conclude with a critical discussion that reflects on the narrative of oil-rich Gulf states as a driving force behind the global land grab and the potential reasons for its prominence.*

*Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC, land grabbing, large-scale land acquisitions, global land rush, Middle East*

*Une augmentation rapide des acquisitions à grande échelle de terres arables associées au pic des prix des produits alimentaires de 2008 a entraîné une foule de publications par des journalistes, des organisations non gouvernementales et des universitaires. Parmi les récits dominants on affirmait que les États du Golfe, riches en pétrole, réalisaient un « accaparement de terres » aux dépens des pays pauvres en ressources. Cependant, on en savait peu sur les acteurs qui effectuaient ces transactions et où elles se situaient. Cet article évalue dans quelle mesure les États membres du Conseil de coopération du Golfe (CCG) sont réellement des acteurs principaux dans ce jeu. Tout d'abord, nous avons comparé le nombre total de transactions et les surfaces agricoles en jeu et montrons que les États membres de la CCG sont des acteurs relativement mineurs par rapport aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Uni, à la Chine, à Singapour et à la Malaisie ; chacun de ces pays ont finalisé plus de transactions que tous les États du CCG pris ensemble. Nous avons ensuite comparé la répartition géographique des acquisitions, en comparant les tendances pour les pays membres du GCC avec celles des principaux pays investisseurs et avons identifié les*

*pays qui ont acquis des terres auprès les pays les plus défavorisés au plan financier. Nous avons conclu par une discussion qui remet en question le récit des États du Golfe riches en pétrole comme moteurs de l'accaparement de terres et les raisons de son succès.*

*Mots-clés: Conseil de coopération du Golfe, CCG, accaparement de terres, acquisitions de terres à grande échelle, ruée mondiale vers les terres, Moyen-Orient*

### Introduction

There is a new “wild West,” and the “Arab cowboys” are in town (Farrar 2014, 243). Wielding deep pockets of oil wealth, they are snatching up farmland from the poorest people of the world though backdoor deals with corrupt governments—at least according to the dominant narrative in the “global land grab” discourse. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and media outlets have typically characterized land grabbing as “transnational in character and driven largely by the Gulf states, Chinese and South Korean governments and companies” (Borras and Franco 2012). When large-scale land acquisitions first appeared on the media and NGO radar, specifics about size and scale were sparse, and the nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were singled out as one of the primary drivers.

The reasons GCC member states might want to invest in agricultural land are numerous: low levels of domestic production, reliance on international markets, impact of price shocks, projected impacts of climate change, and commodity price fluctuations in response to export bans. The arid to semi-arid landscape of the Arabian Peninsula does not have a single perennially flowing river, which is a significant constraint on the agricultural capacities of Arab Gulf states. In the last five or six decades, hydrocarbon wealth has allowed these countries to build urban centres with modern infrastructure and a large number of high-rise buildings. Concurrently, as the population urbanized, residents’ quality of life has increased immensely, and the ambitious development plans of these countries led them to invite large numbers of expatriate guest workers. All these factors added significant pressures on natural resources, especially arable land and water, and forced host countries to rely on food imports and to look abroad for land that could be farmed for the purposes of investing countries.

In this article, however, we do not focus on the potential justifications for large-scale land acquisitions, or on the need to invest in agriculture and food systems for food security. Rather, our focus is on the extent to which the narrative about the “global land grab” was accurate: were the GCC member states dominant players in and drivers of the global land grab?

With the benefit of improved data, we assess the extent to which the oil-rich Arabian Gulf land-grabbing narrative is substantiated. In so doing, we explore several layers of the question: signed contracts, amount of land acquired, and who is finalizing deals with the most financially constrained nations and with the least accountable and most corrupt governments. We assess the large-scale land acquisitions of the GCC member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), then contrast it with those of the investor nations which have signed the largest numbers of contracts (the United States, Singapore, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and China).

We approach the question of the oil-rich Arabian Gulf land grabbers based on investment practices, analyzing more than 600 contracts from the 11 nations (6 GCC member states and top 5 investors) over a 15-year period (2000–2015). While Farrar (2014) has challenged the narrative of large-scale GCC-state land acquisitions from a historical, legal, and relational perspective, we analyze the largest contemporary database of land deals to understand the macro trends at work. In the section that follows, we provide a brief overview of the “global land grab” and the narratives that developed around oil-rich Arabian Gulf land grabbing. Our findings suggest that GCC member states were not the first to acquire large tracts of land and that, in the aggregate, GCC member states have completed far fewer contracts and acquired less land than other large-scale investor nations. Furthermore, in the aggregate, the GCC member states show investment patterns similar to those of the largest investor nations; they do not stand out as finalizing deals with more corrupt governments or more deals with the least accountable governments. We conclude by discussing why the oil-rich Arabian Gulf land grabber narrative may have emerged.

### **The “Global Land Grab”**

The purchase or lease of large tracts of land is not new, but the scale of foreign acquisition of large land areas in the most recent decade—on the magnitude of 50–80 million ha, approximately the land area of Spain, France, or Turkey—has set it apart as a particularly concerning trend. Because such acquisitions occurred largely as private transactions, many of the details were not known, and thus the exact nature of contracts, the magnitude of the sales or leases, and the players involved were often a matter for speculation. Even when a country is relatively transparent about land deals—as is Ethiopia, by posting contracts online (Cotula 2013)—the amount of land involved varies significantly depending on which source is referred to and which classification is used. For example, there are vastly different figures for how much land (in hectares) is at stake in Ethiopia: 602 760 (Cotula et al. 2009), 1 000 782 (contracted,

Land Matrix 2016), 2 649 632 (intended, Land Matrix 2016), 3 524 000 (Friis and Reenberg 2010), or 3 619 509 (Oakland Institute 2011). One of the greatest differentiating factors is whether such numbers include the amount of land available for lease and/or committed to lease as well as land actually leased. As the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports (Hallam 2013), actual land leases are often fewer and less extensive than reported.

Land acquisition has attracted considerable media and advocacy attention. One report, published by the International Land Coalition, states that data from some media sources “must be treated with extreme caution” (Cotula 2011, 6). Woertz (2011, 108) suggests that the media have created a certain “hype around the so-called landgrab investments.” Even land that is confirmed to have been acquired by foreign investors may not actually be used: some studies suggest that the proportion of acquired land actually in production is minute (Johansson et al. 2016; Woertz 2011; Verhoeven and Woertz 2012). While the extent is uncertain, and implementation limited, the media’s hype and the value-laden language of “land grabbing” pre-judge the economic and social impacts that land acquisitions may have at the community and national levels, as well as the expected environmental ramifications of new farming infrastructure and intensive agricultural activities.

The global financial crisis and the food commodities and energy price increases of 2008 are commonly cited as push factors for investors to seek agricultural land (e.g., Cotula 2013; Kugelman and Levenstein 2013; Pearce 2012). However, these were not the only reasons that large-scale land acquisitions took place. For example, in 2000–2001 alone, investors from Malaysia acquired almost 500 000 ha; from 2000 through 2004, investors from the United States acquired more than 650 000 ha; and from 2000 through 2005, investors from the United Kingdom acquired more than 550 000 ha (Land Matrix 2016). Thus, motivations for this form of investment existed before the 2008 global financial crisis and spikes in energy and food commodity prices, but these factors intensified them.

Decisions to acquire large tracts of arable land abroad are based on intricate linkages between land and water (Johansson et al. 2016), as moisture and precipitation are critical components of agriculturally productive areas. Leasing and purchasing of agricultural lands is “largely about shifting land and water uses from local farming to essentially long-distance farming to meet home state food and energy needs. It is, in practice, purchasing food production facilities” (Mann and Smaller 2010, 1–2). Despite this, the factors that explain countries’ interest in becoming “land and water grabbers” (Rulli et al. 2013) vary across space and over time. For some nations, low agricultural potential combined with water

scarcity, leading to high levels of food imports, drive investment decisions (Rulli et al. 2013). Globally, Africa has had the greatest appeal to land investors because in much of Africa both land and labour are relatively inexpensive and because applying irrigation and other capital-intensive agricultural technologies can boost yields (Johansson et al. 2016). Geographic proximity to markets and trade routes, Klare (2012, 198) argues, are another reason investors from the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula have for thousands of years established business connections, and sometimes family relations, across the region. For Arab countries, according to Klare, there is the “added appeal that Islam has made significant inroads in Africa, creating cultural and religious links.”

In addition to these push factors, some governments have actively pulled in investors and offered them an array of incentives, justifying land sales as a means to increase agricultural productivity, increase foreign direct investment, and enable technology transfer (Blas 2008; Verhoeven and Woertz 2012). Contrary to the dominant narrative, there is also an argument that resource-constrained nations with the potential to increase agricultural productivity can benefit from foreign investment. There is potential for technology and skill transfer, as well as general increases to national food production—including exports, a key source of revenue for governments that struggle to fund public services. For example, it is argued that the US\$200 million investment by the Ethiopian-born naturalized Saudi Sheikh Mohammed Al Amoudi could produce enough rice to significantly cut Ethiopia’s rice import bill and increase exports to Saudi Arabia (Khalid 2016). At the same time, Al Amoudi is known to have close relationships with the ruling elite, and his company, Saudi Star, has been criticized by the Oakland Institute (2011) and by Human Rights Watch (2012) for this same investment.

Like Ethiopia, Sudan has long been identified as a nation with extensive arable land as well as lakes and rivers that require significant investment. A 1983 USAID report suggested that with sufficient investment, Sudan had “the potential to become one of the world’s richest nations” (Berry and Geistfeld 1983, 1). Some three decades later, the World Bank reaffirmed the potential for Sudan to become a “breadbasket” nation, emphasizing the importance of both public and private investment (World Bank 2014). By demonizing all investors and investments, the “global land grab” discourse may result in the loss of foreign direct investment and of an important source of government revenue. Thus, the emphasis of the United Nations and the African Union is not on stopping foreign agricultural investment but on outlining guiding principles to ensure that rights are protected, good governance is upheld, and all costs (economic, financial, social, and environmental) are appropriately considered and monitored (AU, ADB, and UNECA 2014).

As the research question driving this article is drawn from narratives, it is worth noting that the framing of “land grabbing” and large-scale land acquisitions varies significantly according to what motivates the individual or organization doing the framing. Cochrane and Skjerdal (2015), for example, show how governmental and NGO narratives can analyze and present the same data in different ways, serving different objectives—both of which contain problematic manipulations. Amidst the “global land grab” discourse, one prominent narrative that emerged, primarily through NGO reports and the media, was that the “oil-rich Arabian Gulf” countries were its primary drivers. In 2008 and the years that followed, comprehensive data were sparse, and this narrative tended to focus on case studies of specific land acquisitions, with no broader or comparative context.

### “Land Grabbing”

*Land grabbing* has been defined as “the sale or lease of land that is used on a permanent, seasonal, or cyclical basis by individuals who have not agreed to the transfer of that land”—a sale or lease whose legality is contested (Cochrane 2016, 1). For example, a national government may issue a sale or lease of land, but the legality of that contract may be contested because people living on the land were not consulted or because the land exists within a protected national park. Conventional understandings can be found in dictionaries. One explains that a land-grabber is a “person who seizes and possesses land in an unfair or illegal manner” (*Oxford Living Dictionaries* 2017), while another defines land grabbing as “the act of taking an area of land by force, for military or economic reasons” (*Cambridge English Dictionary* 2017). With respect to our analysis, the former definition is incomplete because it overlooks corporate acquisitions, while the latter is inappropriate because the land acquisitions in question here are always paid for.

Borras et al. (2011, 11) argue that a land grab “implies power and power relations—which makes it a useful and powerful but controversial term. It politicizes and historicizes the current scramble for land worldwide.” The casual and widespread use of *land grabbing* as a catch-all term skews the argument and implies a non-evidence-based judgment and conclusion. This may be why the National Intelligence Council avoids using the term (NIC 2015). However, Borras et al. (2011, 11), like most others who write on the subject, rather than using “de-politicized terms such as ‘large-scale land acquisitions’ or ‘large-scale land investments,’” continue to use the loaded term *land grab*, even as they acknowledge that it is an “inherently problematic” term and “will always be contested.” Despite these shortcomings, *land grabbing* is the commonly used descriptor for all large-scale acquisitions of agricultural lands by foreign actors.

The broader term *large-scale land acquisition* (LSLA) tends to refer to land sales or leases that are legal according to national laws and have obtained consent from the individuals losing the land in question. Some definitions of LSLAs specify the size of what constitutes “large scale” (e.g., 5 000 ha or more). In this article we use the 200 ha minimum employed in the Land Matrix (2016) database. We recognize that the practice of LSLAs is far less clear than these simplistic definitions imply, and also that there is a strong case to be made for expanding the realm of which investments are considered unethical, based on the vulnerability of and duress placed on individuals and communities to obtain willing “consent” for land exchanges (Cochrane 2016). However, we do not attempt in this article to differentiate between “land grabbing” and large-scale land leases, or to define specific contracts as one or the other. We analyze data for all land sale or lease contracts of 200 ha or more, on a macro scale, to look for trends—inclusive of what some argue are “land grabs” as well as of the less contested LSLAs. This article addresses the level of foreign land acquisition that the GCC countries have been involved in both by contextualizing this activity and by interrogating the discourse of foreign investment in agricultural land.

### **The Oil-Rich Arabian Gulf Land Grabbers**

For governments in the GCC, the idea of producing food beyond their boundaries is not new, but dates back at least to the 1970s. It was intended to assuage concerns about environmental stresses and possible food boycotts by Western countries, particularly in the wake of the Arab oil boycott. These conditions gave rise to Jaafar Nimeiri’s “Breadbasket Strategy,” which envisioned Sudan becoming the major food-producing nation for the Arab world. This strategy would turn Sudan into an agricultural superpower, relying on cheap land and labour and on rain-fed, mechanized farming. By about 1980, however, this dream had fizzled (Kaikati 1980; Verhoeven 2015; Amery 2015). Since then, GCC nations’ investment practices have evolved, expanded, and diversified in order to meet their respective needs, including water, land, food, and agriculture. These considerations have recently gained prominence as climate-change projections present greater challenges for the region and for food-importing countries.

Gulf states have long embraced competitive market economies, particularly as a means to meet domestic demands, but doing so has its risks. In analyzing the effects of international trade on food security, a recent study finds that “as the dependency on trade increases, the global food system is losing resilience and is becoming increasingly unstable and susceptible to conditions of crisis” (Suweis et al. 2015, 6902). For example, between 2007 and 2011, trade was restricted or exports stopped

entirely in more than 30 major food-exporting nations, producing rapid rises in commodity prices (NIC 2015, 4). Globally, these issues triggered significant social unrest, which caught the attention of the security-sensitive Gulf states. By farming abroad, investing countries effectively diversify their options and thus enhance their resilience to spikes and shifts (Rulli et al. 2013, 896). This pragmatic, security-enhancing approach on the part of national governments is one reason GCC nations have been keen to invest in agriculture since the 1970s.

The identification of the “oil-rich Arabian Gulf” nations was bolstered, starting in 2008, by two prominent voices: the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the activist organization GRAIN. GRAIN (2008) described the Gulf states as having “enormous amounts of oil and money” but “sitting on a class time bomb,” identifying them as key players in the “global land grab” because of their reliance on food imports and the rising cost of food commodities. In one of the earliest “land grab” stories, GRAIN wrote that the Gulf states “banded together” to “formulate a collective strategy of outsourcing food production ... particularly in sister Islamic countries” (2008, 2). Along with China, the “Gulf states” were identified as “the biggest players,” with other nations (India, Japan, and South Korea) “moving aggressively to find farmland abroad” (GRAIN 2008). The story was simplified, amplified, and reinforced by others referencing or building on their narratives. For example, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* opened as follows: “As Mideast investors make plans to pump cash into farm projects in the developing world, the head of the United Nations’ food agency said he is discouraging them from making direct purchases of farmland to avoid local backlash or other controversy” Coker (2008). Coker cited Jacques Douf, then head of the FAO, as saying that while he does not oppose “Arabs doing the investment, it is ‘a political hot potato’.”

By the end of 2008, it was commonly accepted that the Gulf nations played a prominent role in the “global land grab.” The *Guardian* reported that “cash-rich but land-poor states, mostly in the Middle East, have opted not to wait for world markets to respond and are trying to guarantee their own long-term access to food by buying up land in poorer countries” (Borger 2008). In 2009, the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development identified Middle Eastern nations buying land to address the cost of food imports and enhance their own food security, along with changes to biofuel policies in the European Union and acquisitions by China and South Korea, as reasons for the rapid rise in LSLAs. In a creative interpretation of land investments “to secure food supplies,” the International Food Policy Research Center produced a list of eight examples of investments between 2006 and 2009, six of which were Middle Eastern nations (the other two were investments by China and



South Korea). This occurred despite the fact that numerous other examples were available at the time, such as a 331 000-ha Swedish acquisition in Russia that took place a year before the brief was published, but that does not appear in its annex of land acquisitions, ostensibly because its goal was not “to secure food supplies” but to secure profit (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009).

In the years that followed, new layers of reasons for the Gulf nations to be particularly in need of acquiring global farmland were added to the narrative. For example, following an analysis of global water stress, a Maplecroft (2011, 1) analyst argued that “oil rich Gulf states,” along with India, China and South Korea, “are acquiring water rich land for agricultural purposes in developing countries to ensure the security of food supplies,” and specifically noted that the land grab focused on areas of “post conflict reconstruction with poor development.” In the same year, Allen (2011) suggested that the Arab Spring pushed “Arab princedoms” to grab land as a means of ensuring political stability through food and water security. Yet these justifications were largely based on anecdotal information or case studies, and they did not contextualize the global trend of LSLAs or address who was actually acquiring land. For example, Mackenzie (2008) offered Kuwait as an example of a land grabber, analogizing the process to colonialism; currently available data, however, tell us that by the end of 2008 Kuwait had finalized only one relatively small (1 434 ha) deal, while investors from the United States had acquired nearly 2.5 million ha.

By 2012, more data and more robust analyses were becoming available. A Worldwatch Institute report took a more evidence-based approach, reporting that Middle Eastern countries were purchasing land but at a rate that placed them behind three other groups of nations: (1) Brazil, India, and China; (2) Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea; and (3) the United States and the United Kingdom (Worldwatch Institute 2012). As more evidence came in, spokespeople for organizations such as the FAO no longer specified specific investor nations, focusing instead on international regulation (Tran 2012). Similarly, Oxfam (2012) focused attention on the World Bank, rather than on the practices of investors from a specific nation. However, much of the media coverage continued to focus on “Middle Eastern royals” (Aburawa 2012a) and the “Middle Eastern land grab” (Aburawa 2012b) and to perpetuate the narrative that the “Gulf Arab states are buying swaths of land in Africa and Asia to secure their own food supplies, often at the expense of local people” (Maasho 2012). As far as we are aware, no one has analyzed the macro, global data on LSLAs to contextualize the role of GCC member states in the broader “land grab” trend. In seeking to answer this question, we realize that other investor nations have also been portrayed negatively (as

the quotations above demonstrate). Future studies are needed to assess other components of the global “land grab” narrative and the extent to which other investor nations, as well as investee nations (particularly those that are not members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), may have been misrepresented.

### Methods

The data used for our analyses are drawn from publicly available data sets. The LSLA contract details were taken from the Land Matrix (2016) database. While the Land Matrix database is the most robust available, the nature of land purchases and leases is such that the data are never completely accurate or complete; contracts are changed or annulled, not all purchases are reported, and some contracts are not made public. These limitations suggest that the best way to analyze the global data is to focus on aggregate trends, without over-emphasizing the exact figures involved. Specific, qualitative studies that use in-depth analyses are better suited to evaluate the nature of individual investors and agreements. The focus of this article is on evaluating country-level trends in investments, based on completed contracts. The contract details were obtained from the Land Matrix database on 26 October 2016, and the analyses reflect what was known as of that date.

As mentioned above, there is ongoing debate as to what should be considered a “land grab” and what a “large-scale land acquisition.” Because we analyzed hundreds of contracts, we did not assess individual contracts to determine the nature of each deal. As the “land grab” discourse demonstrates (e.g., Cotula et al. 2009; Cotula 2013; Friis and Reenberg 2010; Oakland Institute 2011), there are contrasting reports about specific contracts. Media reporting provides one avenue for such an evaluation. Media outlets, for example, report on protests and displacement of people, but such displays of discontent do not necessarily indicate that the land was acquired illegally. We believe that assessing the (il)legality of a contract would require detailed fieldwork. An important question raised in the “land grab” narrative is the extent to which investors from Arab countries have engaged in unfair or illegal deals. In analyzing the 622 contracts in our data set, we have relied on proxy measures relating to income per capita, accountability, and transparency/corruption. While these metrics also have their drawbacks, they allow for a macro-level assessment of trends.

The World Bank’s DataBank was used to obtain information for the other variables. However, several limitations require clarification to ensure that our analysis approach is transparent and replicable.. The data over the years from 2000 through 2015, for some countries and time periods, were not available. For this data set, per capita gross domestic product (GDP)

figures for South Sudan were unavailable for 2006 and 2007, and 2008 values were therefore applied; 2015 GDP figures were unavailable for Papua New Guinea, and 2014 figures were therefore applied; and no GDP data were available for Myanmar, affecting the one deal signed there (by investors from Singapore, for an area of 40 000 ha). For all countries and years, we used data on GDP per capita based on purchasing-power parity at constant 2011 international dollars. We used the World Bank scale of “voice and accountability” (–2.5 to +2.5), but data for 2001 were unavailable for the entire data set, so 2002 figures were applied; figures for South Sudan began in 2011, and the same value was applied to the preceding years. We also used the World Bank scale of “control of corruption” (–2.5 to +2.5), which also did not include 2001 data, so we applied 2002 figures; data for South Sudan were first available in this data set as of 2010, so the 2010 data were applied to the preceding years.

As GDP per capita, levels of accountability, and levels of corruption are not stable, we aligned each specific contract year to the figure of that same year from the World Bank DataBank. For example, if a contract was signed in Indonesia in 2009, we used the GDP, accountability, and corruption figures for 2009. The year was assessed based on the contract agreement year or, if that was unavailable, the year of implementation. The Land Matrix database provided specific years for the large majority of the 622 contracts (544, or 88 %). For the remaining 78 contracts, we used data from 2015, as data for 2016 were unavailable at the time of analysis. While this is a limitation, missing contract data centred on a few key “target countries” for investment, particularly Indonesia, which accounted for 27 of the 78 undated contracts (35 %) and Laos (11 contracts, 14 %). If improved data become available, future analyses can take this data limitation into account. Where chronological analyses are presented, such as investor country trends over time, they include only contracts with known dates. We recognize that the weighting and averaging process makes much of the detail invisible, and reiterate that our findings are best understood as a general analysis of the macro trends.

The data sets serve different purposes. GDP per capita is used to assess which countries are investing in the most resource-scarce nations, as this was a key component of the “global land grab” narrative. The scales of accountability and corruption are proxy measures to assess the “target countries” and evaluate whether GCC nations are acquiring land from more corrupt and unaccountable governments than other investor nations. We addressed the question of GCC member states’ investing in their “Islamic sister” countries by assessing the percentage of the population of “target countries” that is Muslim, according to Pew Global Forum data. Unlike the World Bank DataBank, these data are not available on a year-by-year basis; we therefore used a 2012 publication, which presents data from 2010, and applied those figures for all land contracts.

Our first data analysis includes an assessment of the number of concluded deals, meaning signed and completed contracts, and the total land area involved. All GCC member states are included, but because Oman did not have any deals listed, the analysis is limited to the other five member states (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain). For comparative purposes, we also examine the top five countries from which investment contracts were made (the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Malaysia, and Singapore). Brazil has acquired more land than China, but has completed fewer contracts; Brazil is also unique in that many of its acquisitions as an investor are made within its own borders. It is for this reason, and because China has signed more contracts, that China rather than Brazil is included in the top five. We then aggregate the “target countries” (those from which land is acquired) to analyze investment practices amongst the GCC member states and the top five investor nations.

Using the Land Matrix (2016) contract data and the World Bank DataBank (2016), we analyze the variables (GDP per capita, accountability, and corruption), weighted by the land area involved, to present aggregate average results for each investor nation. Aggregated and weighted averages for investor countries were calculated by multiplying each land acquisition size by the variable, then dividing the sum by the total land area involved. Our analyses do not distinguish between land purchases and leases, nor between “land grabs” and LSLAs. We have analyzed only deals with finalized contracts, not proposals, and do not require that the planned use of the land (e.g., livestock or biofuels) have commenced in order to include the deal. This approach poses limitations: some completed contracts may be speculative (the investor has no intention of using the land but seeks to re-sell it, and, if that fails, may annul the deal), or the amount of land used may be only a fraction of the signed contract amount. An example of the former is a contract for 160 000 ha completed by a U.S. investor who later abandoned it, which is nevertheless included in the database. An example of the latter is the widely covered Saudi Star investment in Ethiopia, which is listed at 250 000 ha but to date has used only 10 000 ha, with limitations on its expansion (Oakland Institute 2011). The objective of including these data is to analyze contracts, as opposed to how the land is or is not used, as land use may be changed or delayed for a host of reasons. We feel that studies of implementation are better done as case-by-case in-depth analyses, whereas macro-level investor practices are best analyzed based on completed contracts.

There are also data challenges beyond the contract–implementation gap; the investing side of land acquisitions is not always as clear-cut as might be assumed. For example, a land acquisition in 2004 in Argentina (in Ramayon, Santa Fe) is listed as an investment made by Soros Fund

Management, an investor from the United States, but a similar second listing exists under the Qatar Investment Authority from Qatar. It may well be that two deals were struck in the same place, for the same amount of land, at the same time, and for the same stated purpose (livestock), but this appears to be a single land acquisition listed twice because it involved multiple investors. We were not able to verify all 622 relevant listings, and therefore we are detailing the limitations of the data before proceeding to the analysis. The problem of double reporting does not appear to be common in the Land Matrix (2016) data set; we identified just 3 or 4 potential instances of double reporting among the 622 contracts analyzed.

### Findings

The first question we sought to answer in analyzing the data was how many contracts were finalized, what amounts of land are involved, and the average size of land-acquisition contracts for the GCC member nations. As Table 1 shows, of the GCC member states, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have completed the most contracts (26 and 27 respectively), have acquired large amounts of land, and are making large deals. While the U.A.E. stands out as the GCC nation that acquired the most land during the period under study, its total and its average are strongly influenced by one of its deals—a single contract for 1 680 000 ha made in South Sudan in 2008 for the stated purpose of conservation and tourism,—that accounts for almost three-quarters (74 %) of all land acquired by investors from the U.A.E. Compared to the top five investor nations, however, the GCC member states are not leading players in the “global land grab.” Investors from the United States acquired more than twice as much land during the study period as all GCC member states combined (see Table 2). Thus, the “oil-rich Arabian Gulf land grab” narrative appears not to have developed either because of the number of deals or because a disproportionate amount of land was acquired.

TABLE 1  
Land-acquisition contracts and land area, GCC countries\*

Country	No. of deals	Average land area per deal (ha)	Total land area acquired (ha)
U.A.E.	26	94 570	2 269 687
Saudi Arabia	27	60 093	1 622 520
Qatar	18	18 980	341 636
Kuwait	2	31 068	62 136
Bahrain	1	1 000	1 000

\*Excludes Bahrain, with only one investment of 1 000 ha in 2010, and Kuwait, with only two investments, totalling 62 136 ha, in 2008 and 2011).

TABLE 2

Land-acquisition contracts and land size, top 5 investor nations

Country	No. of deals	Average land area per deal (ha)	Total land area acquired (ha)
United States	135	75 752	9 847 869
Malaysia	108	35 976	3 885 360
Singapore	65	47 368	3 030 579
United Kingdom	125	18 568	2 265 281
China	115	20 718	2 216 772

Undoubtedly, the GCC member states are involved in acquiring large amounts of land, but they are hardly the “key players” identified in the media and in NGO reports. The land-grab narratives, however, developed at a specific moment in time, and therefore it may be that GCC countries’ investments occurred first, and thus attracted greater attention. We set out to test this possibility by charting investments by land area across time. Our chronological analysis of investments (Figures 1 and 2, shown with the same vertical scale) highlights Malaysia as the earliest investor to acquire a large amount of land (468 000 ha by 2001). Investors from the United States had acquired more than 650 000 ha by 2004, and U.K. investors had acquired more than 550 000 ha by 2005. It was not until 2008, the year the “land grab” narrative emerged, that the United Arab Emirates concluded its massive land-acquisition deal (1 680 000 ha) in South Sudan, although, somewhat surprisingly, this particular deal is not among those commonly mentioned in media and NGO reports. Notably, the chronological analysis highlights different investment “peaks” for different investor nations—the U.A.E. in 2008, the United States in 2010 and 2012, and Singapore and China in 2011—and that all the years of major land acquisition (>1 000 000 ha in a single year) occurred after the 2008 financial crisis and the concomitant energy and food-commodity price spikes.

GCC nations do not stand out as signing the most contracts, acquiring the most land, or completing the earliest deals. However, the “land grab” narrative suggested that the GCC investors stood as particularly poor investors because they were acquiring land from the most resource-constrained nations, making deals with governments desperate for revenue. In fact, the aggregate GDP per capita of “target” countries in which land was acquired by investor nations, based on purchasing-power parity and weighted according to the amount of land acquired, suggests that few generalizations can be drawn about the “Arab” investors (see Table 3). While the U.A.E. stands out as completing contracts with countries that have relatively low GDP per capita,

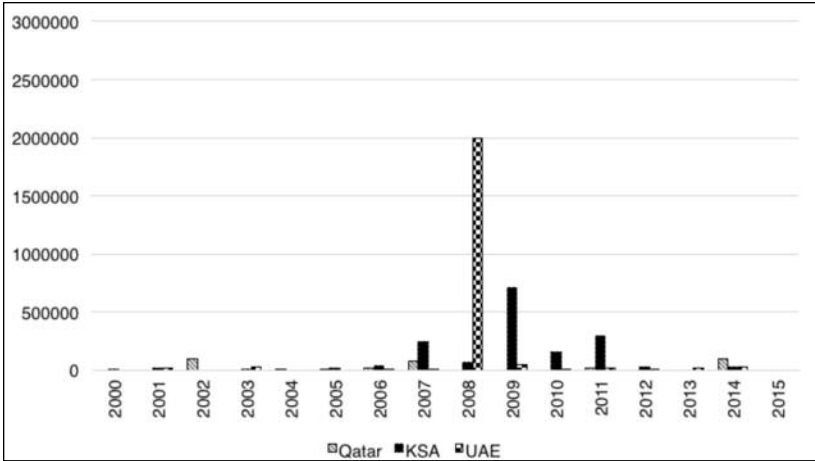


FIGURE 1  
GCC countries,\* investments over time (excludes undated contracts)  
\*Excludes Bahrain and Kuwait

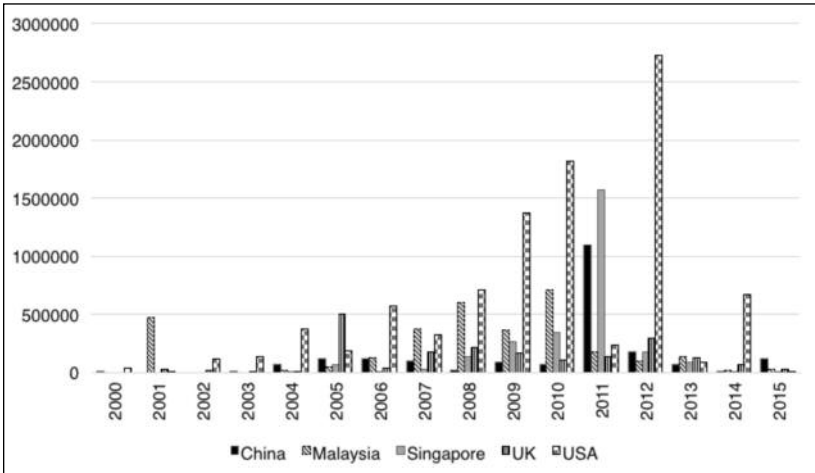


FIGURE 2  
Top 5 investor nations, investments over time (excludes undated contracts)

investors from Qatar acquired land from the nations with the highest average GDP—even when compared to the largest investor nations. The average GDP, weighted by land acquired, of the countries in which the greatest number of contracts were completed (the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Singapore, and Malaysia) all fell between the averages of the U.A.E. (lowest) and Qatar (highest). Of the largest investor nations, the United States stands out as acquiring land from nations with the lowest average GDP per capita, while Malaysia’s LSLAs

TABLE 3  
Aggregate GDP per capita of investee nations

Investor country*	Average aggregate investee GDP per capita, weighted by land area acquired
Saudi Arabia	6 797
U.A.E.	3 635
Qatar	11 480
United States	4 255
United Kingdom	4 303
China	6 597
Malaysia	7 219
Singapore	6 178

\*Excludes Bahrain (1 investment in 2010) and Kuwait (2 investments in 2008 and 2011).

are in nations with the highest average GDP per capita. In summary, although individual GCC countries acquired land in nations on both the higher and the lower ends of the GDP spectrum, the GCC nations as a group do not stand out as acquiring land from the poorest nations, compared to the major investor nations.

GDP per capita provides only one perspective on investment practices. To expand the analysis, we next conducted a similar assessment based on scores related to citizen rights, using the World Bank scale (−2.5 to +2.5) on voice and accountability, and corruption, using the World Bank scale (−2.5 to +2.5) on control of corruption.

*Accountability* is an important addition because it does not necessarily align with GDP. For example, some nations with low GDP per capita, such as Benin, have an accountability score similar to those of nations with much higher GDP per capita, such as Argentina. This measure, although problematic because it is based on perceptions, offers a different perspective on land acquisition, particularly in light of the accusations that people are being forced off their land to make way for investors. An accountable government reduces the likelihood of these rights violations (though it does not preclude them) and increases the probability that violations will be reported. The *corruption* score directly addresses the likelihood of investors' signing contracts with the most corrupt governments. Both of these variables were selected because they reflect aspects of how GCC member states were portrayed in the “global land grab” narrative.

Aggregate results for accountability (Table 4, column 2), weighted by land area acquired, show that the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia acquired land from nations with the lowest average accountability scores, whereas investors from the United Kingdom and Malaysia



TABLE 4

Aggregate accountability and corruption scores of investee nations

Investor country	Average aggregate score, weighted by land area acquired	
	Accountability	Corruption
Saudi Arabia	-0.8	-0.5
U.A.E.	-1.1	-0.9
Qatar	-0.3	-0.7
United States	-0.6	-0.9
United Kingdom	-0.2	-0.4
China	-0.7	-0.8
Malaysia	-0.2	-0.9
Singapore	-0.7	-0.9

\*Excludes Bahrain (1 investment in 2010) and Kuwait (2 investments in 2008 and 2011).

stand out as working with the most accountable nations (although still negative on the World Bank scale). Divergence among investor nations on the World Bank scale, however, is not major: on the 5-point scale, all investor nations’ investee countries had average scores between -0.2 and -1.1 (a difference of <1 point), and all averages were on the negative side of the spectrum.

It was unclear at the outset whether the accountability and corruption scores would mirror each other, and whether the additional analyses would add value. The results show that corruption scores do not align with accountability scores, and provide a unique perspective on land acquisition trends. The results of the corruption analysis (Table 4, column 3) show that four nations similarly finalized contracts with the most corrupt governments: Malaysia, Singapore, the U.A.E., and the United States. On the relatively less corrupt end of the spectrum, the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia finalized contracts with less corrupt nations—although, as with the accountability results, average aggregate corruption scores for all countries sit on the negative side of the scale, and the spread of results on the 5-point World Bank scale are even smaller (-0.4 to -0.9). In terms of overall governance, based on these two variables, the best investor nation, based on average aggregates, is the United Kingdom, and the worst is the United Arab Emirates.

The aggregated evaluations used in our analyses thus far are greatly influenced by large deals signed with particularly unaccountable and corrupt governments, such as U.S. deals in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Emirati deals in South Sudan. To highlight some of these investor trends based on where investments take place (the “target countries”), Table 5 outlines the top three investment destinations for each of the GCC member states and for the top 5 investors globally. The table

re-emphasizes that generalizations cannot be drawn, as target countries vary, and while overall geography influences investments, it is not primary. For example, Malaysia and Singapore have large investments in Congo, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar have large investments in Argentina.

The “global land grab” narrative, at least in its early GRAIN (2008) manifestation, suggested that the GCC member countries were strategically working together and investing in other “Islamic sister” countries. We assessed this claim by analyzing the investee nations by percentage of the population affiliating themselves as Muslims. The Pew Research Center (2012) data are useful as a global study, but present a number of limitations. For example, we are not able to take into account sectarian or denominational affiliations, nor do these data assess the extent to which national laws are influenced by religion. However, our purpose is

TABLE 5

Location of aggregated land deals: Top 3 target countries for each investor country listed

Investor country	Target countries	Total land area acquired (ha)
Saudi Arabia	Morocco	700 000
	Ethiopia	320 248
	Argentina	235 306
U.A.E.	South Sudan	1 680 000
	Zimbabwe	290 000
	Egypt	115 297
Qatar	Argentina	198 087
	Sudan	106 382
	Brazil	33790
Kuwait	Sudan	62 136
Bahrain	India	1 000
United States	Democratic Republic of Congo	3 619 343
	Papua New Guinea	2 043 097
	Mozambique	659 140
United Kingdom	Madagascar	497 000
	Mozambique	379 188
	Indonesia	196 580
China	Guyana	627 072
	Democratic Republic of Congo	285 667
	Laos	241 391
Malaysia	Indonesia	1 296 928
	Papua New Guinea	1 054 120
Singapore	Congo	570 000
	Liberia	220 00
	China	145 000

not to analyze specific investing patterns, per se, but to understand whether, during the study period, GCC member states tended to choose investee nations with a high percentage of Muslim citizens, as GRAIN argued in 2008.

Approximately one-third of the global population is Muslim; neither GCC countries nor the top five investor nations stand out as varying from that global average (Table 6), with two exceptions. Saudi Arabia has invested much more in countries with higher percentages of Muslims in their populations—primarily Morocco, which accounted for almost half (43 %) of all the land Saudi Arabia acquired during the study period. On the other end of the spectrum, the United States stands out as investing in countries with very low percentages of Muslims in the population, primarily the Democratic Republic of Congo (1.5 % Muslim) and Papua New Guinea (0 % Muslim), which accounted for more than half of all U.S.-acquired land (58%). Religion-linked investment patterns do not appear to play a significant role in establishing partnerships and finalizing land-acquisition contracts.

### Discussion

The majority of media commentaries and reports by prominent NGOs on recent land acquisitions in Africa, particularly in the context of “Arab” land acquisitions, describe a “rush for land” that “is out of control” and a “land grab” writ large. Oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchies, pockets laden with a seemingly endless flow of petrodollars are desperate to meet demands of their increasingly restive populations, stand accused of exploitation and buying up vast tracts of African land with no one or regulations to stop them; “Arab cowboys” in a lawless African “Wild West” (Farrar 2014, 243–44).

TABLE 6  
Average percentage of Muslims in population of investee nations

Investor country	Average aggregate % Muslims in population, weighted by land area acquired
Saudi Arabia	63
U.A.E.	15
Qatar	29
United States	5
United Kingdom	25
China	10%
Malaysia	31%
Singapore	23%

\*Excludes Bahrain (1 investment in 2010) and Kuwait (2 investments in 2008 and 2011). Data source: Pew Research Center (2012)

Despite the prominence of this discourse of the “oil-rich Arabian Gulf” in the “global land grab,” the evidence shows that GCC member states did not complete the largest number of LSLA contracts, acquire the largest amount of land, or begin to acquire land first. This is not to suggest that media and NGO attention was unwarranted; GCC member states did complete a large number of LSLAs. However, in addition to acquiring less land and completing fewer contracts relative to the largest investor nations, GCC member states have not acquired land in poorer nations, based on GDP per capita, when weighted by land acquired. Few generalizations can be made about the GCC member states’ investment patterns; nonetheless, of the GCC nations, the U.A.E. stands out as acquiring the most land (including one massive deal with South Sudan), acquiring land from the most resource-constrained nations, and concluding contracts with the least accountable and most corrupt nations, on average. But it is U.S. investors that have acquired by far the most land—more than double the LSLAs of all the GCC nations combined, and almost as much as the four other largest investor nations (Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and China) combined.

Were the narratives about GCC member states reinforced because these were the investors that had attracted attention? Said (1978) and others have suggested that knowledge production can be self-reaffirming in nature, sometimes unintentionally. Or might the focus on GCC investors be akin to what the historian Weber (1976, x) describes as seeing only what one expects to see? When “one looks for different things,” Weber writes, “one *sees* different things.” It might be that journalists and activists began looking in the GCC for problematic examples of investments because of pre-existing political and human rights concerns in the region, and thus saw what they were expecting to see.

Alternatively, building on the more critical aspects of Said’s (1978) work, might this be a case of portraying the practices of “others” as sinister while not noting (or being unwilling to note as forcefully) the same practices by “us”—particularly as many of the media outlets and NGOs involved are based in the United States and the United Kingdom? Said (1978, 1–2) has argued that “the other” plays a defining role as a supposedly contrasting image. The Arabs of the Gulf are also often depicted as irrational stewards and major land grabbers because, for them, money is no object (Pearce 2012). Said (1978, 286) noted that Arabs have long been “associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty” and viewed as people “whose undeserved wealth is an affront to civilization” (108)—a narrative that Said notes has changed little in more than a millennium. In this third potential

explanation, following Said (1978, 273), the land-grab narrative “operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting ... they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks.” We do not posit which of these potential explanations is more likely; answering this question is beyond the scope of our study. However, the findings indicate that posing these questions is justified, and that further study is warranted. Indeed, journalists who looked for different things, found them. For example, in 2013 the *Financial Times* pointed out that few of the LSLAs by the oil-rich Arabian Gulf nations were in the poorest or most corrupt nations and that most were in high- or middle-income nations (Fielding-Smith 2013). In many ways, the negative portrayal is a continuation, regardless of what choices GCC member states make in the agricultural and environmental realm (Russell 2009).

Having analyzed the data and offered comparative analyses, we hope that other scholars will build on this work with critical discourse studies, media analyses, and assessments of NGO reports. Regardless of the reason, if time and resources are devoted to investigate a limited subset of activities, whether geographically determined or otherwise, the broader context can be lost. It is encouraging that investigative reporting such as that done by the Oakland Institute is producing reports on questionable American LSLAs (Oakland Institute 2016a) and the role of Western donors in facilitating policies for foreign direct investment in agriculture, often at the expense of smallholder farmers (Oakland Institute 2016b). While this is a positive development, we have found few examples (e.g., Farrar 2014) that identify the portrayal of “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” activities as problematic, or as worthy of detailed analysis. We hope that this article contributes to addressing that knowledge gap, adds critical nuance to the discussion in the “land grab” discourse, and inspires additional research, particularly in areas of the “global land grab” discourse that remain under researched.

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