



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 10

Foreign Relations of the GCC Countries amid Shifting Global and Regional Dynamics

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Abstract

Five years after the Arab uprisings, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have developed an increasingly active posture in their foreign policies towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Much of this activism has played out on the regional scene, which has been characterized by the confrontation between Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies, on the other. However, the activism of countries such as Qatar, Oman, and the UAE has also highlighted the limits of Saudi Arabia's regional hegemony as well as the weakness of Gulf regional cooperation and integration frameworks. This workshop seeks to analyse the foreign relations patterns of the GCC countries by framing them against shifting global and regional dynamics as well as rising domestic challenges. Overall, the workshop will contribute to critically discussing existing theoretical works on foreign policy analysis by filling the gap in the literature on the contemporary Gulf countries and providing new insights into a pivotal topic for the future of the MENA region and the GCC countries in particular.

Description and Rationale

Five years after the Arab uprisings, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have developed an increasingly active posture in their foreign policies towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The strategic shifts caused by the wave of popular unrest that swept the region from the end of 2010 revealed the increasing importance of the GCC countries' foreign policies in influencing the changes taking place in a number of countries, as in the case of Syria, as well as in restructuring or redefining the matrix of regional roles and alliances among the international powers that are interested in the region, such as the United States, Russia, Iran and some European countries.

These developments prompted many academics and policy makers to argue that the center of gravity in the MENA is shifting towards the Gulf region, namely towards Saudi Arabia and Iran, the old regional contenders, and new players (the UAE, Qatar, and Oman). Since the middle of the twentieth century, the main actors in the region were Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq, constituting a regional order that was deeply influenced by the Cold War. The occupation of Iraq since 2003, the ongoing armed conflict in Syria, the unraveling of the transition in Egypt since the fall of the Mubarak regime, and the civil war in Libya, coupled with changing priorities of the Obama administration in the region, have left a vacuum of power that other Gulf countries aspire to fill.

There are two main aspects connected to the increasing activism of the GCC countries in the MENA region against the backdrop of changing global and regional dynamics. The first one concerns the domestic and regional dimensions: the increasing activism of small countries, namely Qatar, the UAE, and Oman, seems to be a direct consequence of the shifts caused by the Arab uprisings, as well as of the willingness to capitalize on the wealth these countries have accumulated and the broad network of relations they have developed with western policy and academic circles. Notwithstanding crucial differences in the three countries' attitudes, their increased regional clout limits the opportunities left for Saudi Arabia to play the role of the regional hegemon. Saudi Arabia was traditionally considered the main pillar of the Gulf security architecture as well as the most powerful factor legitimizing the stability-oriented policies pursued by the United States in the region. At the same time, it opens spaces for competition and rivalry among the Gulf countries, which ultimately impinges on the prospects for development of the GCC as a regional organization. Besides, Saudi Arabia itself is witnessing a shift in its foreign policy, in terms of becoming increasingly interventionist and favoring the use of military means to influence political change in neighboring countries. This was evident in the case of the direct Saudi intervention in Bahrain in February 2011 and in Yemen in 2015, as

well as in the support lent to local opposition groups in Syria. These shifts in the domestic and regional contexts raise the question of whether Saudi Arabia will continue to pursue a strategy of omnibalancing by engaging in a form of power balancing at the domestic and international levels simultaneously. As argued by some authors, Saudi Arabia is increasingly attempting to “carve out and maintain a measure of relative autonomy” in its external projection (Aarts and Nonneman 2005: 319).

The second aspect relates to the international relations of the GCC countries. Indeed, it is possible to speak of an increased ‘pragmatism’ of the GCC countries’ foreign policies with regard to other regional and global powers. This pragmatic attitude is driven by their national interests and security needs (for example vis-à-vis Iran), as well as by the need to diversify their foreign relations to other players, such as Russia, the European countries, and Turkey. Historically, the United States used to be the main international player in the Gulf region and the GCC countries were its loyal allies despite tensions that arose from time to time. It can be argued that the shifts caused by the Arab uprisings are defining new rules of the game for the relationship between the United States and the GCC countries, which reflects, on the one hand, in the shifting American priorities regarding its policies towards the Gulf and the MENA in general and, on the other hand, the changing security perceptions of the GCC countries themselves. This development challenges the findings of Korany and Dessouki when they surveyed the literature on the foreign policies of developing countries and small states and qualified it as neither purposeful nor independent (Korany and Dessouki 1991).

Based on this background, this workshop examines the foreign policies of the GCC countries five years after the Arab uprisings in terms of drivers, policies, and outcomes, paying particular attention to the MENA region, Iran, and the international powers. This examination will not only focus on current affairs, but will also contribute to establishing a productive link between empirical studies and the existing theoretical frameworks that focus on the foreign policy of small states or of candidate regional powers. All in all, this will shed light on and provide a more solid understanding of how regional powers like Saudi Arabia as well as other smaller Gulf states act and pursue their interests in an environment full of uncertainty, against the backdrop of changing regional and global dynamics and power distribution.

Contribution of the Workshop

The Arab uprisings and the conflicts unfolding in the MENA region have led to an increase in publications on the domestic political and societal developments in the GCC countries; however, their foreign relations are not very well analysed in Arabic or English literature, except when it comes to their relations with the United States. Also, most of

these publications only focus on the analysis of current affairs with a lack of theoretical underpinning and limited reference to the well-established body of literature on foreign policy analysis in general and on the foreign policy of small countries in particular.

Thus, this workshop aims at attracting experts, researchers, and practitioners who are capable of analyzing the GCC countries' foreign policies in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings by adopting this comprehensive perspective, i.e., by combining a detailed grasping of current affairs with the theoretical accuracy derived from an extensive and innovative discussion of the literature that is useful to explain the increasing foreign policy activism of Gulf countries. The ultimate goal of this workshop is to critically discuss the existing theoretical works on foreign policy analysis, fill the gap in the literature on the contemporary Gulf countries, and provide new insights into a pivotal topic for the future of the MENA region and the GCC countries in particular.

Anticipated Participants

Possible questions to be addressed in the workshop include the following:

- To what extent are domestic dynamics shaping the GCC countries' foreign policies towards the MENA region? What are the main drivers and priorities, e.g., maintaining the security and stability of the ruling families, containing the pressures of the youth and other groups advocating political reform, strengthening and enhancing the capabilities of their national armies, etc.
- What is the impact of these foreign policy dynamics on the GCC as an organization? In what ways is the rivalry, conflict or competition between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE impinging on the prospects for regional integration?
- What are the policies of the GCC countries towards the conflicts in neighboring countries, such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen? How are the GCC countries managing their relationships with the 'Arab Revolution countries' in North Africa, e.g., Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya?
- What are the GCC countries' prevailing perceptions and policies towards Iran after the nuclear deal? How will the agreement impact on power relations in the Gulf region?
- Is there a 'European pivot' among the GCC countries? What are the prospects for the GCC countries' relations to the United States and Russia?

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Silvia Colombo is Senior Research Fellow in the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme at the International Affairs Institute (IAI) in Rome. She was the coordinator of the European Commission's project 'Sharaka – Enhancing Understanding and

Cooperation in EU-GCC Relations' between 2012 and 2014. An expert on Middle Eastern politics, she works on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, transatlantic relations in the Mediterranean, and domestic and regional politics in the Arab world. Among her research interests are also the relations between the European Union and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and energy dynamics in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Dr. Colombo holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Politics from the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (Florence Branch) and a Master's Degree in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. She speaks Arabic fluently and has travelled extensively to the Middle Eastern region. Her recent publications include "The Gulf and the EU: Partners or Competitors?" in S. Gstöhl and E. Lannon (eds.), *The Neighbours of the European Union's Neighbours: Diplomatic and Geopolitical Dimensions beyond the European Neighbourhood Policy* (Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2014).

Dr Eman Ragab is an expert researcher in regional security in the Middle East at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) in Cairo. Her specific focus is on the Gulf region and Egypt. Currently she is the Editor in Chief of *Bada'el (Alternatives)*, a series of peer reviewed policy papers issued quarterly by the ACPSS. She also worked as the editor of "Theoretical Trends in International Relations," a periodical supplement to the *Journal of International Politics al-Siyassa al-Dawliya*, which is one of the leading peer-reviewed journals in the Arab region being issued by Al-Ahram since 1964. During 2011-2014, she was the academic coordinator of the "Gulf Studies Program" at the Regional Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo RCSS. During 2014, Dr. Ragab was non-resident fellow in the Future Center for Advanced Researches and Studies in Abu Dhabi. Before working at the ACPSS, she served as a Research Analyst, Political Issues Unit - Information and Decision Support Center, in the Egyptian Cabinet.

She gained her Ph.D. in International Relations from the Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences, Cairo University, in 2014. Her works have been published in English and Arabic in many Egyptian, regional, and international platforms. Her recent publications include: "Iran's Regional Role in the Arab Region?" (in Arabic), in :M.M. al-Zayat and N. Mosa'ad (eds.), *Surveillance Study on Iran* (Cairo: The Institute for Arab Research and Studies – The Arab League, 2014).

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