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Knowledge for All

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Israel and the Gulf Monarchies: A New Regional Security Complex or Just Complex Regional Security?

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Abstract

Do the normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain now constitute a new Regional Security Complex (RSC)? Taking at its starting point the idea of the RSC first outlined by Buzan and Waever, this workshop explores how we might reimagine the RSC beyond the contingent idea of ‘adjacency.’ With Israel and the Gulf monarchies as its focus, this workshop takes an interdisciplinary approach to exploring if RSCs are now defined more by path dependencies (some subtle, others less discreet) that are not so contained by geographical barriers. These dependencies might help explain change in RSCs which, hitherto, have been seen as largely static concepts and configured around shared identities as well as interests.

Objectives and Scope

How should we conceive of the Abraham Accords? The signing of the Accords amid much fanfare in Washington September 2020 was seen by their supporters as vindication of a new regional order, underpinned by the Trump Administration, that, behind the scenes, had proceeded through a hidden evolutionary process since at least 2006. It also vindicated Binyamin Netanyahu’s “outside- in approach” to the issue of Palestine, an issue that could be pushed to the margins, a problem to be managed rather than solved.

In May 2021, the violence in Gaza, Jerusalem and within Israel itself challenged this narrative. Resolution of the conflict (the symbolism of Hamas firing rockets toward Jerusalem in defence of the holy sanctuary) underscored the view that (1) peace has to be achieved with, rather than from the Palestinians and (2) the UAE and other Gulf Monarchies exercised little influence over the scope and scale of the fighting, suggesting that as a mechanism for recasting regional security relationships, the Abraham Accords are in fact ephemeral.

But the Accords were NOT broken. While surprising perhaps, their resilience as a new form of security architecture can be attributed to five key elements:

- 1) They were never presented by the Gulf Monarchies as the panacea to the Israel-Palestine conflict. They are not peace treaties but ‘Normalisation’ accords.
- 2) The Accords are a **Strategic Choice** for the Emiratis and Bahrainis that saw them as strengthening security and economic ties to Israel. They never were determined by the Israel-Palestine conflict although Netanyahu’s threat of unilateral annexation allowed them to come out of the ‘closet.’
- 3) Israel and the UAE sees the Accords as reflecting their own wider security, notably over Iran AND economic integration. On 1 April 2021 they signed a Free trade deal, covering everything from customs, services, procurement policy and intellectual property rights. Ninety-five percent of trade will be exempt from tariffs. Trade by August 2020 was already \$1.4 billion (up from just \$200m in 2020) and Mubadala SWF has a 22 per cent stake in Israel’s Tamar gas field and invested \$100m in 6 Israeli venture capital firms. Equally, while Abraham Accords have grabbed the ‘headlines’ for the Israeli government, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum too represents an evolving coalition where economic drivers are enforcing security integration between Israel, Cyprus, Greece, France, Egypt and Italy overt gas is produced and transported.
- 4) The psychological, as well as political acceptance among Arab elites not just of Israel’s right to exist within secure boundaries but acknowledging the historic legitimacy of Jewish claims to the land, claims that 1) challenge the narrative of Zionism as a Colonial project and 2) implicit acceptance that this places such rights on a par with the Palestinians which has implications for issues related to the ‘right of return’ etc. This is implicit within the Abraham Accords. It is a huge boon for the Israelis and should not be underestimated.
- 5) To the above must be added the shared concerns over the position of the United States. As Martin Indyk, former US Ambassador to Israel noted, Washington’s “local partners will have to come to understand their role in an American-supported, rather than American-led regional order.” In 2021, Israel came under the US Central Command, and participated in military exercises under its umbrella with Bahrain and the UAE in November 2021.

Therefore, the broad question this workshop will seek to explore is the intellectual coherence of the Abraham Accords as a security hub. By exploring the history of Israel’s relations with the Gulf monarchies, and critically examining the current trajectory and

type of relations that have evolved from the Accords, the workshop will examine the extent to which interests can become norms that, overtime , can be institutionalised within an agreed security framework.

More broadly, the workshop therefore looks to explore what factors have shaped the security architecture between Israel and the Gulf monarchies by examining the evolution, contemporary manifestation, economic reach and political influence of the relationships as a form of Regional Security Complex. While the Copenhagen School writers emphasised adjacency and proximity as key drivers of RCTs, the Abraham Accords suggest geographical proximity alone needs to be reimagined. Indeed, if a security complex is defined by the level of securitization that results from the scope and proximity of the interactions between its actors, the Abraham Accords highlight the process of at least partial de-securitization. The normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel has in effect created a security hub (community) defined by amity (rather than enmity) and around which relations with other Gulf states have become mediated.

Higher education (HE) systems in the Gulf region have played a fundamental role in the advancement and development of their people. HE systems in the Gulf region have been characterized by their responsiveness to the needs of their peoples and governments, supporting the growth and development of their countries. These systems have also been responsive to the rapid global changes. In 2015, the emergence of the Global Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, with its 17 specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) resulted in the call for governments around the world to work to achieve sustainable development and combat climate change. Moreover, climate change, which threatens both human beings and the planet, has also been under the microscope with great focus from international organizations and governments.

In terms of education generally and HE specifically, there has recently been a greater focus on concepts related to issues of climate change and sustainability in the form of sustainability education, environmental education, education for sustainable development, and climate change education. Accordingly, HE systems in the Gulf region are now orienting themselves to contribute to the SDG agenda. It is expected that HE systems in the Gulf region will work side-by-side with other systems in activating their role in achieving sustainability and combatting climate change.

However, this is no easy task. Gulf countries' rapid economic development has been largely due to carbon-intensive resource extraction (Al-Badi & AlMubarak, 2019; Salahuddin, Gow & Ozturk, 2015). Studies have found that the per capita oil and gas consumption, and carbon emissions in the Gulf region is "uniquely high" among countries in the region (Hertog and Luciani, 2009). Although governments in the region have all now committed to carbon neutrality and shifting to sustainable sources of energy production, leaders have also doubled down on oil production in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Additionally, the concept of sustainability remains abstract, complex, and multidimensional (Ceulemans et al., 2015; Waas et al., 2011). As an emergent global model, meanings and practices associated with advancing sustainable development vary significantly (Williams & Millington, 2004). Sustainability has become a buzzword that is used by policymakers, scholars, scientists, journalists, and the public alike, due to its impact and significance. Scholars have worried that this will increasingly result in "greenwashing" – meaning commitments to sustainability that are not substantiated by

action. These concepts have received significant attention from HE researchers globally but less so in the Gulf region.

With this in mind, this workshop will ask: how are HE systems in the Gulf region at national, regional, and global levels addressing these issues and having an impact on the movement towards sustainability and climate change action? At an institutional level, what roles are universities in the Gulf acting to support their nations and governments in this movement? There is no doubt that HE systems in the region have been entrusted to play a transformative role in sustainability and climate change. This workshop comes as an initiative to map the current efforts and trigger future work, calling for more future-oriented planning for HE systems in the Gulf region and their institutions.

Contribution to the Field of Gulf Studies

Our understanding of alliances has been shaped by traditional concepts such as band wagoning, balancing and hedging. In recent times, however, the international system has experienced change so seismic - notably the shrinking power differential between the dominant global actor, the United States, and its competitors – that our understanding of alliances, not least in the Gulf, now needs to be recast. There is uncertainty in policy-making circles as well as in the scholarly literature over whether Washington retains the political will, legitimacy and requisite power to provide institutional leadership that can shape outcomes in the Middle East. Traditional alliances tend to be ‘inside out’ institutions with defined rules, including strict criteria for admission. They are not best suited to facilitate modes of omni-enmeshment that can lead to improved relations between sectarian and/or strategic foes. Security hubs, by contrast, are flexible in terms of membership and can even include non-state actors as well as state actors, non-binding in terms of obligations and focused upon a specific threat, challenge or mission. Although such flexibility might compromise longevity of an alliance if it is configured around countering a single threat, this self-same flexibility has the potential to be harnessed for effective conflict management inside informal frameworks. To this extent, the evolution of the Abraham Accords between Israel and the Gulf Monarchies provides a worthy case study of how a new regional security architecture can emerge. This moves the debate beyond great power intervention as a key variable in deciding the scope and extent of regional alliances. As such, this project explores how new informal alliances are, under the appropriate conditions, well suited to evolve into consensus driven frameworks that can manage, and even resolve, conflicts across the Gulf region and indeed the wider Middle East.

Workshop Agenda

The theme of the workshop offers a variety of subjects that will enable the participants to elaborate on the applicability of the concept “Regional Security Complex” to the relations between Israel, the Gulf countries, Palestine and other actors (including the Palestinian Diaspora) across the Middle East. The workshop’s agenda is open to theoretical as well as historical studies that will enhance our understanding of the concept and the actual possibilities inherent in its applicability. More particularly, the following areas, divided into three blocks, offer a solid historical and conceptual basis for discussion and papers. To this end, the workshop looks to invite applications that address, in whole or in part, the following themes:

Block One. The Historical Background

1. The evolution of Israel's ties with the Gulf monarchies: values versus interests?
2. The Abraham Accords and the decline of American Hegemony
3. The Spectre of Iran and Regional Realignment

Block Two. The Conceptual Setting

4. Rethinking the concept of Regional Security Complex
5. Israel and Gulf – An emerging security hub?
6. Criticism within the Gulf toward the emerging Israeli-Gulf cooperation
7. Security and Economy: Strengthening or weakening Israeli-Gulf cooperation

Block Three: The Regional Players

8. Iran's attitude toward the emerging Israeli-Gulf security cooperation
9. The Palestinians, Jordan and regional security.
10. The role of the US in the emerging Israeli-Gulf security hub
11. The Russian and Chinese responses to the Israeli-Gulf cooperation
12. The place of Saudi Arabia in the emerging security hub.

Publication Plans

The proposed workshop has well developed publications plans. The Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham University, is home to the Durham Middle East Papers (Middle Eastern Papers - Durham University) and as part of the School for Government and International Affairs, it also has close ties to the Global Policy Journal Home | Global Policy Journal which publishes articles on global and regional security. This outlet is internationally recognized and does commission special issues. Should the workshop be accepted, negotiations would begin to develop the selected papers for a special issue. Finally, the workshop organisers sit on the boards of several academic journals, including Middle Eastern Studies. This too commissions 'special issues' and might well be interested in producing the papers as an edited collection.

Finally, we acknowledge of and offer full compliance with the Workshop Director and Publications guidelines as set out on the GRCC Website.

Professor Clive Jones is Professor of Regional Security (Middle East) at Durham University and Visiting Research Professor in the Department of Historical and Classical Studies, NTNU in Trondheim Norway. Prior to these appointments he was Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Leeds. In 2022, he became Director of the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Durham University. Alongside *The Clandestine Lives of Colonel David Smiley: Code Name Grin* (Edinburgh 2019) his more recent publications include *Britain and State Formation in Arabia 1962-1971* (Routledge, 2017), with Tore Petersen, *Grand Strategy and the Contemporary Middle East* (Gerlach Press, 2021), and *Fraternal Enemies: Israel and the Gulf Monarchies* (Oxford University Press, 2020). He has published in some of the leading journals in International Relations and regional security including *International Affairs*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Middle East Journal*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, *Civil Wars*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* and *Intelligence and National Security*. His work has been featured in leading international media outlets, including the BBC, Al-Jazeera, RAI (Italy) and ZDF (Germany) and Public Broadcast Radio in the United States. In 2010, his book *Britain and the Yemen Civil War* (2004) was the basis of BBC Radio 4 Documentary *Document: 'Britain's Secret involvement in the North Yemen Civil War'*. He has acted as an advisor to the UK MoD and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

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