



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 3
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Perspectives on Hard Security Issues in the Gulf

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Abstract

The idea of creating an inclusive regional security system in the Middle East has received considerable attention over the past few years. The wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, the GCC crisis from 2017-2021, attacks on oil installations at Abqaiq and Khurais, continued instability in Iraq, and the Iranian nuclear issue, have facilitated a reassessment in some foreign and security policies. Evolving regional relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords and the changing balance of relations between regional parties and international actors such as the US, Russia and China have also created new contours and motives for international engagement. Having abandoned maximalist policies in the region, the US appears intent on building a more competitive and cooperative military presence in the kingdom to counter the influence of US adversaries. CENTCOM's Red Sands Integrated Experimentation Center tasked with countering drone and missiles threats is a key expression in a revitalised era of hard power cooperation.

Security in the Gulf region remains in flux, unaided by differences between US and European policymakers following the 2018 US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran, and the building of ties between some Gulf Cooperation Council states and Israel following the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020. Israel and Iran continue to engage in a shadow war, and Iran is pushing ahead with its nuclear, missile, and drone programs and consolidating a

network of allies and proxies in a so called “axis of resistance” against US interests. Countries in the region are demonstrating a recent openness toward de-escalation and rapprochement. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are showing an interest in reducing tensions with Iran and Iraq has hosted several rounds of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Kuwait and the UAE have each appointed an ambassador to Iran more than six years after recalling their top envoys in 2016. However, amid stalled nuclear talks with the US, and the Saudi execution of activists including Shi’ite Muslims, Iran suspended a fifth round of talks with Saudi Arabia in March 2022. Protests in Iran could threaten the process further. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are improving ties with Turkey, with multiple recent diplomatic exchanges. Whilst these initiatives may not address wider points of contention, some may represent a watershed moment for advancing a dialogue on issues affecting Gulf security.

Objectives and Scope

Building on related GRM workshops which have explicitly covered Gulf security, e.g. the 2012 workshop covering prospects and challenges for an Asian Role in Gulf Security, this workshop looks to both core and peripheral regional players which might contribute to an inclusive, multi-tiered process on a range of issues relevant in building a durable and sustainable process towards Gulf security.

This workshop is orientated especially to exploring aspects of hard security affecting the Gulf countries, defined here as inter-state military related threats, dangers or risks, including with reference to bilateral and multilateral relations. We will not consider soft security issues which primarily contend with political, social and economic threats not amenable by military solutions. Our workshop considers the impact of extra-regional actors on the region and how the shifting global dynamic is likely to affect Gulf security going forward.

Contribution to the Field of Gulf Studies

Although there has been a growing number of academic publications on Gulf security, most of the published work is either very US centric or reflects a narrow perspective that does not fully take into account the growing shift in power and influence from West to East as well as the implications of this trend on the Gulf security. Accordingly, and in relation with the current complex international and regional dynamics, including issues such as the rise of China and the Ukraine conflict, issues related to hard security in the Gulf emerge as a critical topic of investigation.

The rationale behind this idea is to introduce a holistic yet detailed account of hard security related issues from theoretical and empirical background. Our workshop is expected to make a small but tangible contribution to the field of Gulf Studies that will help in bridging the widening gap between fast changing realities on the ground and the unaccommodating existing literature concerning the emerging construct of the Gulf security. It aims to contribute comprehensively in discussing a host of hard security-related topics in relation with the Gulf.

Workshop Agenda and Potential Topics

We expect papers to concentrate on a number of topics related to “hard security” such as confidence and security building measures or conventional and unconventional arms proliferation. Papers might reference chronologies of viable steps based on specific eventualities and outcomes. In dealing with a limited set of topics, we aim to achieve a more contiguous workshop and one where papers speak more directly to each other.

Potential topics might include:

- The GCC as a regional security organisation
- The impact of the GCC crisis 2017-2021
- The regional balance of power and emerging threats
- The development of air defence capabilities
- Defence industry prospects in the Gulf
- US policy and the shape and form of US commitments in the region, including CENTCOM provisions
- The energy – security nexus
- Iranian regional behaviour, up to and beyond any nuclear deal
- Regional security models and their application to the Gulf
- De-escalatory/peace-building measures and their impact(s)
- Foreign security presence in the Gulf: nature, role, prospects
- Future role of possible regional and extra-regional security providers to the Gulf states

Publication Plan

- We intend to publish many or most of workshop papers in a special issue of a Q1/Q2 journal
- We will consider a complimentary policy-orientated publication with a leading think tank
- We welcome further proposals for monographs or edited volumes on this topic in The Gulf States and International Affairs series at Lexington Books, edited by one of the workshop directors

Selected Readings

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Vakil, Sanam, and Neil Quilliam, *Steps to Enable a Middle East Regional Security Process*, Chatham House Research paper, April 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021-04-14-steps-middle-east-security-vakil-quilliam_1.pdf