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Knowledge for All

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Workshop No. 6

GCC States and Non-Arab Regional Middle Powers: Opportunities and Challenges Amidst Shifting Regional Balances

1. Directors

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2. Abstract

As a highly penetrated sub-regional system, the Gulf region has been informed by the dynamics of the intra-regional rivalry and cooperation, as well as the patterns of involvement by the non-Arab regional powers, namely Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have varying views on these non-Arab regional powers, with each state shaping its approach based on its own priorities and divergent agendas. For instance, within the GCC states, there are those who had normalized relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords signed in September 2020, while others have rejected such normalisation. Conversely, GCC countries adopt varying approaches toward Turkey and Iran, with either positive or neutral relations. These differing stances significantly shape the policies adopted by each GCC member as they navigate the regional challenges.

Through adopting a combination of case study and interdisciplinary approaches, the workshop aims to focus on the roles of non-Arab middle powers in shaping the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. We seek to analyze the evolving relationships of the GCC states with non-Arab regional powers, and to develop interpretation of new knowledge on how the major issues on the domestic, regional and global levels have shaped their relationships today. Topics of discussion will include recent developments in the region such as the aforementioned Abraham Accords, the change in the Iranian leadership after the recent presidential elections, GCC's reconciliation with Turkey, Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement, and the ongoing war in Gaza since October 2023 and its implications for Turkish-GCC, Iranian-GCC relations, and Israeli-GCC relations. Beside the transformation of

regional and global politics in the last two decades, the workshop will also focus on how the younger generation of rulers who accessed power in the GCC states have been conducting relations with non-Arab regional powers. The perceptions and approaches of these rulers are key to understanding the dynamics of GCC states' foreign policy making toward non-Arab regional powers. Given the importance and relevance of the topic, the workshop aims to explore how GCC states can develop strategies to address shared challenges in the region through their relationships with non-Arab regional powers.

3. Context

The Middle East has undergone profound structural transformations that have affected its security and stability since the end of the Second World War in 1945. It can be argued that each decade has brought about significant changes in the region. From the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, to the military coups in some Arab monarchical countries in 1950s and 1960s, to the Cold War between monarchical and republican regimes in the same period, to the Egyptian – Israeli peace agreement in 1979, to the Iranian revolution in the same year, to Iran – Iraq war from 1980 to 1988, to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, to the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, and to the onset of the Arab Spring in December 2010.

Global powers, such as Great Britain, the U.S., and the Soviet Union (later Russia), have significantly influenced the regional landscape. Additionally, both Arab middle powers—such as Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—and non-Arab middle powers—including Turkey, Iran, and Israel—have played crucial roles in these developments. Since the 1950s, the influence of the two non-Arab middle powers, Iran and Israel, has been crucial to the changes in the region. However, after the onset of the Arab Spring, another non-Arab middle power, Turkey, started to influence regional dynamics especially through its involvement in the Syrian crisis from 2011 onward. The GCC states view the involvement of these non-Arab middle powers from different vantage points, with some perceiving it as a threat and some seeing it as an opportunity.

While the foreign policy-making of GCC states has been examined in academic literature, it continues to develop in response to the shifting dynamics both within the region and globally. A robust combination of theoretical analysis and case studies is essential, with a focus on specific events and/or concepts. By employing both case study and interdisciplinary approaches, the workshop seeks to examine the key drivers of GCC foreign policy within the context of broader regional transformations. The workshop aims not only to enrich the literature on the geopolitics of the GCC states but also to offer robust policy recommendations for policymakers across the broader Middle East, as well as in the GCC states.

4. Focus/Objectives

The workshop will focus on the multifaceted relationships between the GCC states and non-Arab regional powers, namely Turkey, Iran, and Israel, aiming to unpack the complexities driving these interactions. We welcome papers from scholars across diverse disciplines who can apply key concepts and theoretical frameworks pertinent to their areas of expertise. Given the scarcity of academic research on the relationships between the GCC states and non-Arab middle powers in the Middle East, this workshop aims to bring together scholars from various fields to enhance the scientific rigor of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies on the contemporary issues shaping these relationships.

Key objectives include analyzing the influence of global powers like the U.S., Russia, and China on these relationships, as well as the impact of regional polarization from the onset of Arab uprisings to the signing of the Al Ula declaration. Participants will need to explore the impact of leadership transitions in the GCC nations, repercussions of Israel's war on Gaza, impact of Iranian and Turkish policies on the GCC dynamics, assessing how these factors shape alliances and rivalries in the region. Through this exploration, the workshop seeks to foster a deeper understanding of current geopolitical trends.

In this context, we expect the participants to address the following major questions:

- What are the parameters of GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- How has the regional polarization due to the transformative impact of the Arab uprisings affected GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- How have the intra-Gulf divisions due to the Gulf Crises of 2014 and 2017 have affected GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- How have the policies of the global actors, such as the U.S., Russia, and China, affected the course of GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- How has the Gaza war affected GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- What are the implications of the Gaza war to Israeli-GCC relations?
- How has Russia's war in Ukraine affected GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- How has Turkey's pursuit for a regional leadership role affected its relations with GCC states?
- What were the motives behind GCC states' normalization with Turkey (Or Iran, Or Israel)?
- What are the areas of cooperation and conflict in GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel?
- How has Iran's pursuit for a regional leadership role affected its relations with GCC states?
- What are the soft power tools that non-Arab middle powers could employ to enhance their relations with GCC states?
- Can Turkey emerge as a key player in Gulf security affairs?
- What are the implications of change in Iranian leadership to Iran-GCC relations?
- How do generational shifts in Gulf leaderships affect GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel, and the geopolitics of alliances for the GCC states?

5. References

Stephen Larrabee (2011). Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council. *Turkish Studies*, 12: 4, pp. 689-698.

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Sinem Cengiz (2020). *Turkish-Saudi Relations: Cooperation and Competition in the Middle East*. Gerlach Press, Berlin & London.

Simon Mabon (2015). *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Shireen Hunter (2017). Iran's Policy Toward the Persian Gulf: Dynamics of Continuity and Change. In Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Neil Quilliam, Gawdat Bahgat (editors) *Security and bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham.

Hamad Albloshi (2018). Kuwait – Iran Relations: A Constructive Approach or a National Interest-based Perspective. *Journal of Social Sciences – Kuwait University*, 46: 1, (in Arabic).

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2016). *Israel and the Arab Gulf States: Drivers and Directions of Change*. Center for the Middle East - Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller (2017). The Gulf Arab States and Israel Since 1967: From 'No Negotiation' to Tacit Cooperation. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 44: 4, pp. 576-592.

Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky (2017). Israel's Relations with the Gulf States: Toward the Emergence of a Tacit Security Regime. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38: 3, pp. 398-419.

6. Papers Focus/Topics

These are suggested themes, yet the participants may submit abstracts on other topics as long as they lie within the scope of this workshop:

- The imprint of the Arab Spring on GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel
- The impact of the Gulf Crisis 2017–2021 on GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel
- GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel within the context of regional hotspots: Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen
- Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the GCC states and regional organizations, i.e., SCO, BRICS
- The role of global challenges, i.e. Ukraine War, U.S. – China rivalry and energy crisis, on GCC states' relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel
- The role of soft power in GCC states' relations with non-Arab regional powers.

7. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format

Authors should refer to the [GRM Paper Guidelines](#).

8. Publication Plans

The workshop organizers intend to publish the accepted papers in an edited volume titled "*GCC states' relations with non-Arab Middle Powers in the Middle East*," provided that the author(s) present their work at the workshop. To ensure that the papers enhance knowledge in the field, they will go through peer review individually. Also, if there are papers submitted on case studies (such as 5 papers on GCC states' relations with Turkey or Iran or Israel), the workshop coordinators are considering putting them into a Special Issue of a peer-reviewed journal. Papers that do not fit in with the joint publication will be considered for publication individually in a journal or as a GRC paper, under the guidance of the workshop directors.

9. Directors' Bio Notes

Dr. Sinem Cengiz is a Researcher in the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University, and a non-resident fellow at the Washington-based Gulf International Forum. She earned her Ph.D. from the department of Area Studies of the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara in 2024, with a dissertation on GCC states' foreign policy-making. Cengiz is the author of the book titled "*Turkish-Saudi Relations: Cooperation and Competition in the Middle East*" published by Gerlach Press in 2020, and co-editor of the book titled "*The Making of Contemporary Kuwait: Identity, Politics, and Its Survival Strategy*" by Routledge in 2024. She is currently working on her forthcoming book exploring the relations between the GCC states and Turkey during the Syrian

crisis. She has been a weekly columnist for Saudi Arabia's largest English language daily newspaper, *Arab News*, since 2016. She specializes on the international relations of the GCC countries, Turkey-GCC relations, and internal and foreign policy nexus in the Gulf region. Cengiz has published several peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters in edited books.

Dr. Hamad H. Albloshi is an associate professor of political science at Kuwait University. He earned his Ph.D. from the Fletcher School – Tufts University in 2012 – 2013 and his dissertation focused on the discourse of the hardline conservatives in Iran. He is the author of “*The Eternal Revolution: Hardliners and Conservatives in Iran.*” He has published many academic articles, both in Arabic and English, on issues related to the relationship between Iran and Kuwait, Iran's internal politics, Kuwait's internal politics, Kuwait's political system, Shi'a and Ajam communities in Kuwait, and the Houthis. These articles appeared in journals at Kuwait University as well as the *Middle East Journal*, the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Journal of Arabian Studies* and the *Muslim World*. He has published several chapters in edited books as well. He has also published short pieces that appeared on *al-Monitor*, Gulf Arab States in Washington, the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Gulf Studies Center – Qatar University, Middle East Institute – National University of Singapore, *Amwaj.media*, and *Aljarida daily* newspaper.