



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge  
Knowledge for All

## 15<sup>th</sup> Gulf Research Meeting

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### Workshop No. 9

## GCC Futurescapes: Past and Present

### 1. Directors

#### **Mohammed Alsudairi**

Lecturer in Politics and International Relations of the Arabic Speaking World, Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, The Australian National University

#### **Bader Al-Saif**

Assistant Professor, History Department, Kuwait University

### 2. Abstract

The term futurescapes –a portmanteau of future and landscape– evokes the idea of future(s) as geographic terrain(s) open to topographical mapping and excavation. Visible landforms –valleys, mountains, estuaries, deserts, and beyond– constitute the physical contours of possible futures in the Gulf. Invisible geologies, or the mental and intellectual forces driving these possible futures in the Gulf, buttress the visible landforms, and (re)define its contours of possibility. The workshop explores the (in)visible past and present imaginaries about the future in the states and societies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Whether consciously or not, Gulf studies have long been wedded to a somewhat constricted set of research foci that emphasize an ephemeral and precarious Gulf, or “Cities of Salt” (*Mudun al-Milh*) to adopt the phrasing of the Saudi-Jordanian novelist Abdulrahman Munif. From rentierism and (un)sustainability to security and great power politics, the GCC operating on borrowed-time is a pervasive motif. In fictional works, more often than not, the Gulf (and wider Arabian Peninsula) is depicted as an irradiated wasteland or the source of a world-shattering apocalypse. One need only look at the lore of the *Matrix* or *Mad Max*, where the Gulf becomes the backdrop for human extinction-level events (Machine City emerging in the Empty Quarter, or a fictional Saudi-Iranian war paving the way for the destruction of most global oil reserves), to mention a few.

In this workshop, we propose moving away from these despondent frameworks by exploring how local actors in the GCC –from cultural producers to policy-setting bureaucrats– have envisioned and aestheticized different futures, i.e., futurescapes, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. We are also interested in the forces and sources that have shaped these imaginaries and defined them, as well as

their evolution over time. The aim of such an approach is to generate new insights that allow us to creatively rethink our basic assumptions about GCC states and societies, as well as their potential pathways, by primarily centering local perspectives and visions about the future.

### 3. Context

The GCC is increasingly becoming the “ground-zero” of the future. Fleets of robots roam the Grand Mosque in Makkah serving throngs of pilgrims. In Kuwait, the construction of an unprecedented gigawatt-class data centre for artificial intelligence is rumoured to be under construction just as the United Arab Emirates has emerged as a near-competitor to both the United States and China in the field of machine learning. Indeed, GCC stakeholders are investing considerable resources into nascent space programs, Artificial Intelligence (AI) ministries and bodies, futuristic mega-cities, green hydrogen energy production, among many other initiatives. Amidst what is clearly a tumultuous race towards techno-industrial upgrading, one can discern a celebratory zeitgeist regarding the power and promise of technology, rivaling only that of America’s Silicon Valley or China’s Zhongguancun.

The accompanying narratives and aesthetics of futurism are ubiquitous, actively promoted by modernizing states, and resonating among receptive national publics. From (Saudi) Founding Day videos to Manga series like *Fi Qadm al-Zaman*, neo-traditionalist representations of Arabian attire and architecture are intermeshed with starship landings and cyborg-pets. In Dubai, the Museum of the Future, an architectural feat designed as an oval-building adorned with Arabic script conveying the optimistic sayings of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, stands as testament to the city’s ever growing futuristic pretensions. Implicit in all of these multiple state messages is the promise of a “return” to a glorious Islamicate past defined by mastery over the techno-sciences. There is no better embodiment of that spirit than the Emirati government launching, into a firmament where two-thirds of the stars have Arabic names, a probe with the name of *al-Amal* or “The Hope”.

Such state-level narratives strike an intentionally optimistic -and one could even say “Icarian”- tone about the direction and destiny of the Gulf. However, there are other imaginings about the future found at other societal scales, and they are more circumspect yet creative. In theatrical plays (like *Neo-Jibla*), movies (like *Abed/Slave*), and artistic movements (like Gulf-futurism), among others, we find speculative forays about the future. Such outlooks are coupled with reflections on consumerism, the hold of tradition, and environmental degradation. As one would expect, the futurescapes of the Gulf are real and exciting, yet contested.

### 4. Focus/Objectives

The workshop aims to unpack and interrogate the meanings behind these futuristic policies and narratives circulating throughout the GCC at various scales. What is being conveyed about the promises and perils of the future in terms of the GCC’s regional and global positionalities? What do specific aesthetic choices concerning the future (i.e., neo-traditionalism, the “tribal-modern”, the Gulf-in-space) tell us about the zeitgeist and the current negotiation of national/supra identities? What is being occluded/emphasized and why? And what, furthermore, are the constellations of “base” elements –political, economic, and social– that are informing the “superstructures” of the future? From a macro perspective, are there tensions in what is being articulated about the future between elites and their societies, and between the Gulf states themselves? What, moreover, are futuristic imaginings telling us about burgeoning cultural and societal trends? What are the sources of the angst and tension gestating within Gulf societies at large? These are just some of the questions we bring to the workshop, and hence the introduction of and interest in futurescapes.

The focus is oriented around the current moment, which is replete with dynamic and creative imaginings about the future. But the workshop is also sensitive to the ways in which these imaginaries build upon pre-existing intellectual legacies and histories of global import: the “high-modernism” pioneered by Kuwait in the 1960s-70s, or Saudi Arabia’s embrace of semi-socialist state planning during the Faysalian period. These, and others, are examples of futures-past worthy of investigation. The workshop intends to tie the latter with the present, highlighting continuities and disruptions in how the future has been (re)imagined in the Gulf.

The workshop is therefore highly interdisciplinary and intersectional, welcoming insights from disparate fields as wide ranging as intellectual history, the arts, public policy, the sciences, and cybernetics, among others. By taking futurescapes as an analytical prism, we can galvanize new conversations (and insights) about Gulf states and societies that move us away from conventional narratives and approaches.

## 5. References

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## 6. Papers Focus/Topics

- Dystopian/utopian futures of the Gulf in fiction and non-fiction
- Elite understandings of the future
- Popular understandings of the future
- Anthropocene: climate, (un)sustainability, and the future
- Gulf aesthetics: past, present, and future
- Intellectual/cultural influences and legacies shaping imaginaries about the future among Gulf elites and populations
- Representations of the future in Gulf visual/printed media, past and present, and their implications
- Representations of the future in Gulf national visions
- Representations of the future in Gulf state/societal "sites" (museums, expos, gigacities, initiatives), past and present, and their significance
- Imaginaries about the future and its impact on Gulf religions, societal norms, and cultural traditions
- Theoretical interventions into the concept of Gulf futurism
- Gulf development projects outside the Gulf
- Military technology and the future of war in the Gulf
- The geopolitics of the Gulf in space
- Artificial Intelligence discourses, policies, potential, and challenges
- Futures-Past understandings in the Gulf
- Robots: agency, uses, and implication on societal relations
- Nexus of Islam, technology (encompassing AI, cyber, robotics) and the future
- Alternative futurisms in the Gulf

## 7. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format

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

## 8. Publication Plans

There are two routes we are planning for publication. One is to pursue an edited volume with the Australian National University Press (or any other reputed university press). The other is to publish a special issue with the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. This will be contingent on the quality and quantity of the received submissions. The publication of an edited volume or special issue is earmarked for 2027 given peer-review and copy-editing cycles. Papers that cannot 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

**Mohammed Alsudairi** is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations of the Arabic Speaking World. He holds a PhD in Comparative Politics from the University of Hong Kong (HKU), an MA in International Relations and International History from the London School of Economics and Peking University, and a BSc in International Politics from Georgetown University. Prior to his appointment at CAIS, he was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at HKU, working on a project examining the intersections between religion and infrastructure in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Since 2015, he oversaw the development of the Asian Studies Program at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. More recently in 2022, he was awarded a research fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation to work on his upcoming book manuscript.

Informed by a multidisciplinary and multilingual approach, Alsudairi's research focuses on the historical and contemporary connections between the Middle East and East Asia; the histories of transnational revolutionary and counter-revolutionary networks in the Arab world; ideological security bureaucracies and state-led cultural engineering practices across Asia; and Muslim religiosities and sectarian identities in the Middle East, China, among others. His academic work has appeared in multiple academic journals including *The Middle East Journal*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Global Policy*, and *Oxford University's Journal of Islamic Studies*.

**Bader Al-Saif** is the founding president of Al-Saif Consulting, an assistant professor of history at Kuwait University, an associate fellow at Chatham House (UK), and a non-resident fellow at The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (DC). He specializes in the Arabian Peninsula, namely its geopolitics, public policy, culture, reform dynamics, transnational trends, and gender studies. Al-Saif has over two decades of experience researching and working in the Arab Gulf states, most notably as a deputy chief of staff to a former prime minister of Kuwait and a senior vice president of the oil and gas sector at Agility. Prior to this, he was a consultant to the Office of Tony Blair.

Al-Saif is the recipient of various awards and a co-founder of several NGOs in the fields of education, youth empowerment, and transitional justice. He has published numerous peer-reviewed works, contributes policy analyses to multiple outlets, and is frequently quoted and interviewed by renowned media platforms around the world. He holds a PhD with distinction from Georgetown University, a Master of Education and a Master of Theology, both with honours, from Harvard University, and a Master of Law with honours from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He graduated *summa cum laude* from Boston College with a double major in political science and history.