Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

16th Gulf Research Meeting

Cambridge, 21-23 July 2026

Workshop No. 4

Overlapping Ambitions: State-Led Economic Diversification and Mounting Intra-GCC Competition

1. Directors

Glnar Eskandar
Qatar University

Gerd Nonneman
Georgetown University

2. Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments are attempting to accelerate their countries' economic diversification through ambitious, nationally minded visions and strategies. These state-led initiatives demonstrate a shared desire to transition away from hydrocarbon reliance. They also exhibit significant similarities. While economic diversification has the potential to foster cooperation among the historically hydrocarbon-heavy GCC economies, similarities in the member states' national visions indicate increased intra-bloc competition. The GCC economies are increasingly vying for the same investors, visitors, and global prominence across several sectors.

This workshop will explore the implications of these overlapping government-led strategies. The workshop aims to address questions such as: What are the effects of these economic rivalries, both real and perceived, on the GCC economies and intra-bloc relations? Will this overlap foster economic growth across the GCC equally, or will it produce winners and losers? Will it encourage innovation and healthy competition, or will it risk duplication and resource waste? What is the role of the GCC as a regional institution—a facilitator of coordination, a platform for policy alignment, or a bystander to mounting rivalries?

This workshop invites comparative studies focusing on more than one Gulf state from economic and political economy perspectives. Scholars are encouraged to consider competition among GCC states in specific sectors (e.g., aviation, logistics, renewable energy, sports, art, AI, finance, etc.), comparative analyses of national strategies, and the evolving role of state-owned enterprises and sovereign wealth funds in contributing to regional rivalries. Research examining the efficacy of the GCC as an economic union in this context is also welcome. Papers employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods are all welcome, provided they offer comparative insights across more than one GCC state. Papers from a range of disciplines or from an interdisciplinary perspective are welcome – – but they should be written to be accessible also to an informed audience beyond the discipline in question.

3. Context

The GCC economies are undergoing significant transformations. These states began to consider economic diversification policies as early as the 1980s. However, their efforts have arguably intensified following oil price crashes in 2008, 2014, and 2020. To secure long-term fiscal stability, ensure employment for their national populations, and advance their global economic positions, all GCC governments have launched long-term "vision" documents describing their economic objectives for the future. These include Bahrain Economic Vision 2030, Kuwait Vision 2035, Oman Vision 2040, Qatar National Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, and the UAE Centennial 2071. These plans share common objectives: establishing economies less reliant on hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas), enabling the private sector to participate more effectively in the economy, promoting knowledge-based sectors, enhancing trade and logistics, and transforming financial and logistical centers into regional and global hubs.

These strategies indicate that the GCC member states all recognize the importance of diversification in their resource-dependent economies, but they also reveal an intensification of competition among members of the same economic union. Saudi Arabia's initiative to attract multinational headquarters unapologetically threatens Dubai's established position as the Gulf's commercial hub (Salacanin 2025). In the skies, Emirates, Qatar Airways, Saudia, and soon Riyadh Air compete fiercely, openly demonstrating their ambitions to dominate the global aviation industry (Saunokonoko 2023). Even in sports and event hosting, from the FIFA World Cup to Formula 1, GCC states show a shared desire for global prominence (Szalai 2025). In terms of logistics, the Duqm port in Oman, the NEOM project in Saudi Arabia, and the Jebel Ali port in the UAE all compete for the same shipping routes, products, and partners (Szalai 2025). And several of these states are also exploring or already directing investment towards blue and green hydrogen, and AI-related data centers.

The escalating rivalry and competition among GCC economies merit thorough examination. From an economic perspective, market-driven competition can be beneficial by enhancing consumer choices, reducing prices, and fostering innovation. Nonetheless, government-sponsored competition may result in unnecessary disruptions, oversaturating already well-served markets and potentially wasting public funds by copying the successes of other GCC economies. From a political standpoint, prioritizing national interests over regional cooperation may compromise the credibility of the GCC as an economic bloc and hinder its declared objective of promoting economic integration among its member states.

The GCC states' overlapping ambitions also impact their global position. International investors, multinational corporations, and external entities may exploit these rivalries and incite competition among Gulf governments to secure more favorable arrangements. State-led rivalry could also undermine the GCC's attractiveness as a common market. If nationally minded ambitions trump the regionalization of regulations and the advancement of the GCC as a common market for domestic producers and foreign partners, then competition among these states is bound to deepen intra-bloc economic imbalances.

While the literature on the GCC states' diversification efforts has grown in recent years, it has largely remained confined to consideration of each state's strategies — comparatively or individually — while the connection with GCC integration, and the questions raised above, have been left virtually unexamined, with the exception of just one study on the potential benefits of regional integration for GCC diversification (Mishrif & Alnaamani 2018) and a single baseline study identifying the questions raised here (Eskandar 2025). This workshop intends to remedy this apparent blind spot.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

This workshop will focus on exploring the growing economic competition and rivalries among the GCC economies, particularly in relation to their diversification trajectories. It will situate these growing trends within theoretical frameworks of economics and political economy. The workshop will focus on the similar pressures for diversification that the GCC economies share, the overlap and potentially unnecessary rivalry that mark the transformation of their resource-dependent economies, the rise of state capitalism and state-led competition, and the implications of this rising competition for the GCC as an economic bloc. The workshop will also examine and evaluate the GCC's capacity for coordinated diversification against the risks of becoming increasingly ineffective due to heightened rivalry among its member states.

The workshop thus has three interrelated objectives: (1) to identify and analyze commonalities in the economic policies of GCC member states, documented in their national visions and strategies and through their individual economic or investment policies; (2) to examine the manifestations and outcomes of rivalry among the GCC economies across sectors; and (3) to contemplate the implications of these rivalries for the future of the GCC as a regional bloc. By pursuing these objectives, the workshop positions itself at the intersection of economics, political economy, political science, and Gulf studies. It will contribute to the literature on the Gulf by evaluating the extent, explanatory factors, drivers, and implications of the economic competition that is emerging among GCC states as they pursue their diversification strategies.

The GCC states' state-led initiatives may not necessarily reflect comparative advantages, and may instead represent a political drive for prestige and international recognition. The GCC economies are increasingly competing in the same sectors such as logistics, finance, aviation, renewable energy, sports, technology, and tourism, often with no real consideration of how their ambitions overlap or potentially conflict. They all, to varying extents, appear to view economic diversification into such sectors as integral to their future development, and therefore may consider competition inevitable. A major objective of the workshop is to explore whether these overlapping diversification strategies can lead to sustainable development or rather threaten to result in costly rivalries.

Competition among the GCC economies is notably intensifying. For instance, there is fierce competition between Dubai, Riyadh, and Doha to attract financial and business headquarters, which raises the question of whether this rivalry enhances regional competitiveness or fragments regional markets. While competing GCC airlines are among the most prominent in the world, several have been heavily subsidized and have not proven consistently profitable (Saunokonoko 2023). Furthermore, the Gulf states seem to be developing similar renewable energy infrastructures despite not sharing the same competitive advantages (Eskandar 2025). These overlaps may indicate the potential ineffectiveness of state-led diversification, as opposed to market-driven diversification. Given the dearth of scholarly investigation on this theme, the workshop will examine such cases to determine whether rivalry fosters innovation and competitiveness or undermines the GCC's collective economic success.

5. Paper Focus/Topics, Format and Referencing Style

The workshop welcomes proposals on a variety of topics surrounding the theme of growing economic competition and rivalry among GCC countries. These include comparative analyses of GCC national visions and areas of overlap; case studies on competition in key sectors such as aviation, logistics, finance, renewable energy, tourism, and sports; and examinations of the implications of overlapping strategies for the GCC's economic development and intra-bloc relations. The workshop also welcomes papers that analyze the political consequences of rivalry for GCC integration and regional collaboration, the role of state-owned enterprises, sovereign wealth funds, and national champions in promoting competition, and the influence of external actors, including foreign investors and multinational corporations, in promoting this competition. Finally, papers comparatively examining practices and experiences in other economic blocs, such as ASEAN or the EU, to gain insight into the growing competition within the GCC are also welcome —although, in paper selection, those with a predominant focus on the Gulf will be prioritized. In addition, theoretical perspectives on what drives competition or cooperation in economic unions such as the GCC are also encouraged.

Authors should specify the scholarly contribution and policy implications of their research.

Papers should be in the range of 6–7,000 words not including footnotes and bibliography and should follow the Chicago referencing style (numbered footnotes including page references where a specific page or range is used), with a bibliography at the end. Submissions should include an abstract of some 500 words.

Format: Submissions should be in MS Word, A4 page format, with margins of 2.5 cm top, bottom, left, and right; line spacing: 1.5; Font: Times New Roman 12-point for text; 11 for citations; 10 for footnotes.

6. Publication Plans

The co-directors plan to produce a volume — either as an edited book or a special issue of a scholarly journal — that has wide accessibility and visibility, positioning it as a key contribution to ongoing debates on Gulf diversification and regional competition. The co-directors will determine the outlet once paper acceptance decisions are finalized, taking into account thematic fit and the publisher's or journal's reach among both academic and policy audiences. This volume will be organized into four thematic sections, in addition to introduction and conclusion prepared by the co-directors: (I) Overlaps in National Visions: comparative studies of diversification strategies in the GCC; (II) Sectoral Rivalries: case studies of competition in specific sectors such as aviation, finance, logistics, and renewable energy; (III) Institutional Dimensions: papers on the role and effectiveness of the GCC as an economic bloc and its challenges in coordinating economic policy; and (IV) Theoretical Perspectives: papers situating GCC economic competition within broader academic debates (e.g., rentier economies, state capitalism, regionalism, and economic diversification).

For papers that cannot be accommodated within the edited volume, the co-directors will work with the authors to identify additional publication outlets once paper acceptance decisions are finalized, These may include a special issue or individual submission to relevant peer-reviewed journals, such as the *Journal of Arabian Studies*, other area studies or disciplinary journals in political economy, economics, development studies etc. Papers that do not move forward through these channels will, as long as they meet the quality criteria through peer review, be published as GRC Papers, ensuring that all contributions are published.

7. References and suggested reading

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8. Workshop Directors

Glnar Eskandar is an applied economist specializing in the economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Her research employs advanced econometric methods and disaggregated macroeconomic data to critically examine widely held assumptions about the Gulf and to answer pressing economic policy questions. Her work bridges economics and area studies, combining quantitative analysis with an understanding of the Gulf region’s context. Eskandar has published on the region's competing diversification strategies, intra-GCC trade dependencies, and fiscal inefficiencies, including book chapters, peer-reviewed manuscripts under revision, and policy briefs for leading institutions such as the Middle East Institute. She has presented her findings at major conferences, including the Gulf Research Meeting in Cambridge. Professionally, Eskandar has over a decade of experience as an economic specialist. She has authored more than 120 analytical reports on macroeconomic trends and the investment climate in Qatar throughout her career. Eskandar successfully defended her doctoral dissertation, entitled “Reassessing the Centrality of Government Expenditure to Non-hydrocarbon Economic Growth in the GCC (1980-2021): An Empirical Sectoral Analysis,” for the PhD in Gulf Studies at Qatar University in June 2025. She also holds a Master of Arts in International Relations from Syracuse University and a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service from Georgetown University.

Gerd Nonneman is Professor of International Relations and Gulf Studies at Georgetown University in Qatar, where he served as Dean 2011–2016. His current research focuses on the international relations of the Middle East, Gulf foreign policies, the political economy of the GCC states, and European policies towards the Gulf. Professor Nonneman has published numerous journal articles, chapter contributions, and books on the politics of the Middle East, Muslim communities in Europe, and comparative political and economic liberalization. He serves as editor of the *Journal of Arabian Studies* and is a former executive director of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. He received his PhD in politics from the University of Exeter, where he later returned as Professor of international relations and Middle East politics, and where he also held the Al-Qasimi Chair in Gulf Studies and directed the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies and the Centre for Gulf Studies. In addition to his academic work, Professor Nonneman has worked in the private sector in the Gulf region and consulted for a range of companies, non-governmental organizations, governments, and international institutions.