



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## **14<sup>th</sup> Gulf Research Meeting**

**Cambridge, 9-11 July 2024**

### **Workshop No. 9**

## **Conflict Resolution Initiatives in the Gulf and Beyond:**

### **Strategies of Engagement and Prospects of Success**

#### **1. Directors**

##### **Professor Tim Niblock**

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#### **2. Abstract**

Since the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” at the end of 2010, the Gulf region and neighbouring areas have been trapped in sectarian conflicts, proxy wars, and civil hostility. The past three years have witnessed the relaxation of geopolitical tensions among Gulf countries, suggesting that a new wave of reconciliation and rapprochement is underway. Yet at the same time conflicts in the wider West Asia/North Africa region continue, and in some cases are growing more intense. These conflicts inevitably have implications for conflict-resolution processes within and among Gulf states, and may indeed affect their stability and well-being. The Israel-Gaza war (ongoing at the time of writing) is perhaps the most salient case in point. This

workshop seeks to take stock of the record of conflict resolution in and affecting the Gulf region. What have been the dynamics behind attempts at conflict-resolution? What techniques of, and approaches to, peace-making are likely to prove of lasting significance? And how can ongoing conflicts affecting the Arab states of the Gulf best be brought within an effective conflict-resolution framework? Contributions can be in the form of case studies or else can take a broader comparative approach.

Four distinct levels of conflict resolution in the region can be considered. First, conflict resolution within certain Gulf/Arabian Peninsula states, such as the national reconciliation processes in Iraq and Yemen. Second, conflict resolution undertaken by powers external to a conflict between/among Gulf countries (such as the roles of China and Iraq in mediating an agreement to end Saudi-Iranian differences, and the role of Oman in mediating a reconciliation between Qatar and some other GCC countries). Third, dispute/conflict resolution on transregional issues affecting Gulf states, such as on illegal migration, drug trafficking, and terrorism. Fourth, conflict resolution initiatives undertaken by Gulf states on wider regional conflicts, such as those stemming from domestic conflicts in Sudan, Libya, and Syria, and, recently, the war in Ukraine.

### **3. Context**

Over a period of some 50 years, the Gulf region has, perhaps more than any other part of the world, been entrapped in a web of intensive and divisive confrontations/conflicts. It has been a flashpoint for both geopolitical rivalries and ideological, ethnic, and sectarian completion. The domestic and regional struggles have involved the wider region's principal powers – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel – and have also brought to the region the rivalries between major global powers – the US, Russia, and China, besides bringing in “middle powers” such as India, Japan, South Korea, France, and the UK, as active players in regional affairs.

The path of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran provides a particularly instructive narrative. They have been the two major powers and peer competitors in the Gulf. Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution broke out in 1979, the two countries have been caught in a spiral of sectarian strife. Tehran and Riyadh severed diplomatic relations in 1988, and although ties were restored in 1991, there was still deep mutual suspicion between them. Following the destruction of the Saddam regime in 2003 and the increase of Iranian influence in Iraq, in 2004 King Abdullah II of Jordan spoke of a “Shia Crescent” that was taking shape across the region. This concern was perhaps even more strongly felt in Riyadh, as well as in Cairo. Saudi Arabia responded to this by attempting to restrict the influence of the Iran-sponsored militia in Iraq. It gave its backing, instead, to extremist Sunni elements in Iraq, while seeking a regional balance through a strategic partnership with Hosni Mubarak's Egypt.

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring at the end of 2010, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of interfering in the internal affairs of the Arab countries through their Shia populations, while Iran criticized Saudi Arabia for acting as the “bellwether” of the West to contain Iran. In 2016, Saudi Arabia and Iran broke off diplomatic relations again, and the two sides confronted each other in proxy conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and other places, causing a chain reaction and spill-over effect. At the same time, the emergence of Muslim Brotherhood-influenced parties in positions of power in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya was viewed as a grave political threat by some Gulf monarchies. The latter turned their ire on Qatar, seen as a major supporter of Brotherhood groups across the region, and, in 2017, imposed a diplomatic, political, economic, and logistical blockade on their GCC partner. Qatar in turn protected its interests by strengthening ties with Turkey and Iran.

In retrospect, it would appear that through the second decade of this century, the Gulf countries, impacted by regional conflicts as well as domestic political and economic challenges, including the dramatic fall in oil prices, forfeited any opportunity for peace, stability, or development, internally or regionally.

Since 2020, some important changes have been taking place across and around the Gulf. Disenchanted with the US as the regional hegemon and security guarantor, GCC states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have opted for de-escalation and engagement within the region. Thus, in January 2021, the blockade of Qatar was lifted by the GCC, while in April 2021, Saudi Arabia began talks with Iran in Baghdad. The Kingdom also accepted a ceasefire in Yemen and began discussions with its Houthi rivals in that country. At the same time, Turkey moderated its Islamist posture and reached out to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

On the global platform, the GCC states have asserted “strategic autonomy” and have diversified their relations. They have strengthened relations with Russia and China, and are prioritizing links with the Asian nations – India, the ASEAN members, Japan, and South Korea. Most of the latter are major energy and economic partners of the Gulf states.

The Saudi-Iran engagement culminated with the trilateral accord in Beijing in March 2023, when the two Gulf states agreed to restore diplomatic ties, build economic relations, and pursue regional peace and stability. The GCC states have also reached out to Syria and brought it back into the Arab League. Separately, Turkey has also re-engaged with Israel, while, in August 2020, the UAE “normalized” relations with Israel, followed by Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. The last three years have certainly changed the thrust of much of interregional relations in the West Asia/North Africa region, as well as in the Gulf itself. This is clearly encouraging for the prospects of regional peace. Nonetheless, the nature of the emerging regional order remains uncertain. There has not been time for reconciliation to become entrenched to a degree where backsliding cannot occur. Emerging conflicts in the wider region may still come to affect the prospects of continued peace within and among Gulf states.

#### **4. Focus/objectives**

Some of the key issues of focus for this workshop are the following:

- Saudi Arabia and Iran have some way to go before they gain the sense of mutual confidence required for long-term constructive cooperation.
- Conflict resolution in Yemen remains fragmented and uncertain. The political process needs to be re-started and the Houthis assured of a rightful place in national affairs.
- National reconciliation in Syria remains distant. The opposition groups, the Kurds and Islamist parties need to be brought within an all-encompassing national dialogue. Meanwhile, Turkey’s security concerns have ensured that its troops remain deep inside Syrian territory.
- While internecine fighting has ended in Iraq, the political order is discredited and the country remains an arena for US-Iranian rivalry.
- Similarly, while large-scale fighting has ended in Libya, the country remains deeply divided between the Tripoli and Tobruk administrations, the divisions being aggravated by regional players.
- Civil conflict in Sudan, largely the result of external interference in its domestic politics, has caused widespread death and destruction, with no sign of peace and reconciliation.
- The Red Sea and the Horn of Africa are today witnessing the effects of regional and big power rivalries which have left the region fragile and vulnerable to external machinations.
- Above all, the Palestine issue continues to be unaddressed, with Israel’s extreme rightwing government showing no signs of moderation or accommodation; instead, the aggressive

policies of its ministers and extremist supporters have made the situation relating to Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza even more dangerous. The likely impact of the war in Israel and Gaza on peace and stability in the Gulf region may well be significant.

Thus, taken as a whole, while peace prospects in the Gulf and the Middle East, in general, have considerably improved, several important issues need to be addressed urgently through fresh conflict-resolution initiatives promoted by regional states backed by outside powers with an abiding stake in regional stability and peace.

Conflict resolutions in the Gulf and beyond can be studied from interdisciplinary angles. History, political psychology, diplomacy, economy, public relations, and sociology can all be applied to investigate peace initiatives and the prospect of conflict resolution.

In this workshop, we seek to examine the theory, history, dynamics, processes, and prospects of Gulf conflict resolution, ranging from civil conflict termination and peace-building, to inter-state rapprochement.

## **5. Papers focus/topics**

The following illustrative paper topics are intended to give some idea of what the workshop convenors are looking for:

- The origins and categories of conflicts and conflict-resolution in the Gulf
- National reconciliations and ongoing challenges in Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain
- Conflict resolution and rapprochement measures between Iran and Saudi Arabia
- Conflict resolution and rapprochement measures between Iran and the smaller GCC states
- Conflict resolution between Qatar and other GCC countries
- The impact of the Israel/Gaza war on intra-Gulf conflicts and peace-building
- Proposals for the resolution of conflicts related to the activities of terrorist, separatist, and Islamist radical movements
- Regional and global peace proposals for the resolution of conflicts in the Gulf region
- Conflict resolution on border issues between Gulf and Arabian Peninsula countries
- Maritime security conflict resolution in the Gulf
- Conflict resolution engagement and mediation efforts by non-Gulf powers in the Gulf
- Conflict resolution proposals for the Gulf made by international and regional organisations
- Gulf countries' conflict resolution initiatives and engagements with regard to the Syrian, Libyan, Sudanese, Palestinian, and Ukraine conflicts

Papers may take a case study approach or else a wider comparative/theoretical approach.

Paper proposals should fit as closely as possible with this workshop description, notably section 4, and the publication plans (section 7).

## **6. Paper structure, referencing, and format**

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

Participants who do not submit a paper by the 31 May deadline or whose submitted paper does not meet the requirements will be disinvented by GRCC.

## 7. Publication plans

The best of the papers will be published as a special issue in the *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (listed as an ESCI journal).

Papers that may not be publishable in the special issue will still be reviewed by the directors and considered for individual publication in either a peer-reviewed journal or as a GRM paper. Directors will make reasonable efforts to ensure that all accepted papers are published in one of these three forms.

## 8. References

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## 9. Directors' bio notes

**Tim Niblock** is Chair Professor in the Institute for International and Area Studies at Tsinghua University and Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter. He has held the position of Vice-President of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies (2009-2014), Vice-Chair of the UK Council of Area Studies Associations (2010-2014), and Vice-President of the British Society for Middle East Studies (2009-2012). He was the founding Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He has previously served at the University of Reading and the University of Durham. Between 1969 and 1977 he was Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Khartoum.

Among his published books are: *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes* (edited with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun, 2018); *Conflict Resolution and the Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun); *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Yang Guang, 2014); *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century. The Local to Global Transformation* (edited, with Monica Malik, 2013), *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (2007), *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (2006), 'Pariah States' and Sanctions in the Middle East: *Iraq, Libya and Sudan* (2001), *Class and Power in Sudan* (1987), *Iraq: the Contemporary State* (edited, 1982), *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (edited, 1981), and *Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf* (edited, 1980).

**Talmiz Ahmad** joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974 and was posted to Kuwait, Iraq, and Yemen, and then as Consul General in Jeddah, in 1987-90. After appointments in New York, London, and Pretoria, he became the head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000. He did two stints as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, besides being ambassador to Oman and the UAE, Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, and Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he was in the corporate sector in Dubai. Since 2016, he has been a full-time academic. He holds the Ram Sathe Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune. He has authored four books: *Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates* (2005); *Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms* (2010); *The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions after the Arab Spring* (2013). His latest book, *West Asia at War: Repression, Resistance and Great Power Games*, was published in April 2022. He writes and lectures regularly on political Islam, the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean, and energy security issues.

**Degang Sun** is a Professor of Political Science at the Institute of International Studies, and Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, at Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He was Deputy Director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, China, and he was a visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (September 2018-September 2019), and Senior Associate Member at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, and an Academic Visitor to Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2012-2013), Denver University (2007-2008), and Hong Kong University (2004-

2005). His research interests are Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations; Great Powers' Strategies in the Middle East; and China's Middle East Diplomacy.