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Knowledge for All

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Workshop No. 1

The Gulf in the Age of AI: Geopolitics, Security, and Strategic Autonomy after Regional War

1. **Directors**

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2. **Abstract**

Artificial intelligence has become a new arena of power in the Gulf. GCC states are investing heavily in data centers, sovereign AI models, and computing partnerships with the United States and, more cautiously, with China. At the same time, the region has lived through successive wars. The 2025 Israel–Iran war, the Israeli strike on Doha, and the 2026 Iran war brought missiles and drones onto Gulf soil. Iranian strikes hit energy facilities, airports, and even commercial data centers. Digital infrastructure has become both a strategic asset and a target. This workshop asks how the rise of AI, combined with regional conflict and intensifying geopolitical competition, is reshaping the Gulf states' security doctrines, foreign relations, economic strategies, and pursuit of strategic autonomy. It invites comparative papers on the six GCC states and their neighbors. Themes include AI in defense and threat perception, the protection of critical and digital infrastructure, US–China technology rivalry and Gulf hedging, AI in economic diversification and geoeconomics, and AI governance. The workshop aims to produce a double special issue of the *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* and policy recommendations for decision-makers.

3. Context

The Gulf states have moved from being consumers of digital technology to aspiring producers of artificial intelligence. The UAE appointed the world's first Minister of State for AI in 2017 and built national champions such as G42 and MGX. In May 2025 it announced a 5-gigawatt US–UAE AI campus in Abu Dhabi (including "Stargate UAE"). Saudi Arabia created the Saudi Data and AI Authority (SDAIA) and, in 2025, launched HUMAIN under the Public Investment Fund. In January 2026, Qatar and the UAE joined the US-led Pax Silica initiative on secure technology supply chains. Access to advanced chips has thus become a question of alliance politics, not only of commerce.

This technological turn has coincided with the most serious regional war in decades. In June 2025 Israel and the United States struck Iran, and Iran fired missiles at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. In September 2025, Israel struck Hamas negotiators in Doha. From February 2026, the wider Iran war brought Iranian missiles and drones onto the territory of all six GCC states. Gas facilities at Ras Laffan were hit and shipping through the Strait of Hormuz was blocked. In March 2026, drone strikes damaged Amazon Web Services data centers in the UAE and Bahrain. It was widely described as the first wartime attack on hyperscale cloud infrastructure. The attack showed that the Gulf's AI ambitions are exposed to the same threats as its oil and gas.

The existing literature rarely connects these developments. Scholarship on Gulf security has explained regional insecurity, the balance of power and the reliance on external protection (Gause 2010; Kamrava 2018). Other work has traced the post-blockade Gulf order and the role of mediation (Aras, Al Ansari and Yorulmazlar 2021), Gulf economic statecraft (Young 2022), and the rise of strategic restraint as a Gulf doctrine (Al-Nabet 2026b). Studies of AI show how it may shift military balances (Horowitz 2018) and reshape foreign policy analysisitself (Aras, forthcoming). Research on weaponized interdependence and the semiconductor rivalry explains how control over networks and chips becomes a tool of coercion (Farrell and Newman 2019; Miller 2022). Early analyses link these debates to Gulf digital sovereignty in wartime (Al-Nabet 2026a). Yet Gulf studies often treat technology as part of diversification. AI studies, in turn, treat the Gulf mainly as a buyer of chips or a source of capital. Very little research asks how war and AI together are changing Gulf strategic thinking.

The Gulf is therefore a critical case. Its states are small or middle powers with vast capital, exposed geography and deep ties to rival great powers. They seek autonomy through hedging (Kuik 2008), yet AI partnerships may create new dependencies. The workshop responds directly to GRM 2027 priorities, including evolving threat perceptions and strategic doctrines, critical infrastructure protection, the changing US–GCC relationship, and the rising importance of geoeconomics.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The workshop focuses on the intersection of three forces that are usually studied apart. These are the rapid adoption of AI, regional war since 2025, and intensifying great-power competition. It asks how these forces together are reshaping Gulf security doctrines, foreign relations, economic strategies, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. The focus is comparative. Papers may examine one or more GCC states, but authors should draw out similarities and differences across the region. Contributions on Iran, Iraq, and Yemen are also welcome where they illuminate Gulf dynamics.

The workshop invites papers on five themes.

Security doctrines and threat perception. How are Gulf armed forces and security agencies integrating AI into air and missile defense, surveillance, intelligence, and decision-making? How did the 2025–2026 wars change threat perceptions and doctrine?

Critical and digital infrastructure. Data centers, subsea cables, energy grids, and desalination plants are now military targets. How are Gulf states protecting them, and what does resilience mean in a war zone?

Great-power rivalry and strategic autonomy. How do Gulf states manage US conditions on chip exports and Chinese technology offers? Do AI partnerships increase autonomy or create new forms of dependence?

Geoeconomics and economic strategy. How does AI fit into diversification plans, sovereign wealth strategies, and energy-for-compute models? Has the war altered investor confidence and the Gulf's appeal as a global AI hub?

Governance, society and regional order. How do Gulf states regulate AI, manage information and cyber threats, and use AI in diplomacy? Can AI become a field for regional cooperation, or will it deepen rivalry?

The workshop has five objectives. First, it aims to produce a comparative, evidence-based understanding of AI as a factor in Gulf security and foreign policy. Second, it seeks to bridge Gulf studies, security studies, and the emerging scholarship on AI and technology politics. It encourages papers that test concepts such as hedging and technological sovereignty in the Gulf. Third, it will generate policy recommendations for Gulf governments, regional organizations, and international partners on infrastructure protection, technology partnerships, and AI governance. Fourth, it will build a network that brings together senior and junior scholars, Gulf nationals and Gulf-based researchers, and practitioners from defense, technology, and policy communities. Fifth, it will lead to a

double special issue of the *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies,* already agreed with the journal's editor.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

Papers may address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

-AI in Gulf military doctrine, air and missile defense, and counter-drone warfare
-Changing threat perceptions after the 2025–2026 wars
-AI-enabled surveillance, intelligence, and internal security
-Protection of data centers, subsea cables, energy and desalination infrastructure
-Cybersecurity, information warfare, and disinformation during regional conflict
-The Strait of Hormuz, maritime security, and digital connectivity
-US chip export controls, Pax Silica, and Gulf alignment choices
-China, Europe, India, and East Asia as Gulf technology partners
-Hedging, dependence, and strategic autonomy in the AI era
-The future of US security guarantees to the Gulf
-Gulf relations with Israel and Türkiye after the regional wars
-Sovereign wealth funds, AI investment, and the energy-for-compute model
-AI in economic diversification, labor markets, and national visions
-AI talent, education, and research capacity
-Media, public opinion, and AI in Gulf societies
-AI regulation, data governance, and Gulf positions in global AI governance
-AI in diplomacy, mediation, and foreign policy decision-making
-Iran, Iraq, and Yemen in the AI and drone age
-Intra-GCC competition and cooperation on AI
-Country case studies with a comparative dimension

6. Publication Plans

The joint publication will be a double special issue of the *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (Taylor & Francis), with the workshop directors as guest editors. The journal's editor, Prof. Vassilis K. Fouskas, has agreed to accommodate 20 articles, 10 in each of two consecutive issues. The directors will write an introduction for each issue. The articles are planned to cover the 20 paper topics listed above. All articles will go through the journal's standard peer-review process. The Gulf Research Meeting will be fully acknowledged.

Provisional table of contents*

Special Issue I: War, Security, and Infrastructure in the AI Age
Introduction (Aras and Al-Nabet)

1. AI and the transformation of Gulf military doctrine
2. Air and missile defense and counter-drone warfare after the 2025–2026 wars
3. Threat perceptions and strategic restraint in the GCC after the regional wars
4. AI-enabled surveillance, intelligence, and internal security in the Gulf
5. Protecting data centers, subsea cables, energy, and desalination infrastructure
6. Cybersecurity, information warfare, and disinformation in regional conflict
7. The Strait of Hormuz, maritime security, and digital connectivity
8. Iran, Iraq, and Yemen in the drone and AI age
9. The future of US security guarantees to the Gulf
10. Gulf relations with Israel and Türkiye after the regional wars

Special Issue II: Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, and Strategic Autonomy
Introduction (Aras and Al-Nabet)
11. US chip export controls, Pax Silica, and Gulf alignment choices
12. China, Europe, India, and East Asia as Gulf technology partners
13. Hedging, dependence, and strategic autonomy in Gulf AI partnerships
14. Sovereign wealth funds and the energy-for-compute model
15. AI in economic diversification, labor markets, and national visions
16. AI talent, education, and research capacity in the Gulf
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18. AI regulation, data governance, and Gulf positions in global AI governance
19. AI in Gulf diplomacy, mediation, and foreign policy decision-making
20. Intra-GCC competition and cooperation on AI

*Final titles will depend on the selected papers.

Publishable papers that cannot be included in the special issue will be supported towards individual publication in peer-reviewed journals that match their focus, such as *Middle East Policy, Third World Quarterly, Journal of Arabian Studies, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Contemporary Security Policy*, and *Global Policy*. Papers with a strong policy focus may be published as GRC papers.

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8. Workshop Directors

Bülent Aras is Research Director and Professor of International Relations at the Center for International Policy Research (CIPR) in Doha, Qatar. He is also Research Professor at Keele University and Head of the Conflict Resolution and Mediation Stream at the Istanbul Policy Center. He received his PhD in International Relations from Boğaziçi University in 1999. He previously taught at Sabancı University, Istanbul Technical University, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and held fellowships at St Antony's College, Oxford, and the Woodrow Wilson Center. He served with the capacity of Deputy Undersecretary at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he led the Center for Strategic Research and the Diplomatic Academy. His research covers Gulf and Middle East foreign policy, mediation and conflict resolution, public diplomacy, and the use of data-driven methods and AI in the study of diplomacy. He has published in the Journal of Peace Research, Foreign Policy Analysis, Policy Studies Journal, International Political Science Review, Third World Quarterly, Middle East Policy, and The Review of International Organizations. His recent work on the Gulf examines Qatar's foreign aid, its role at the United Nations, aviation diplomacy, and the post-blockade Gulf order. His forthcoming article in New Media and Society examines large language models

in foreign policy analysis. His books include Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside (Routledge, 2023, with Şaban Kardaş) and Turkey in Crisis: Institutions, Reform and Conflict (Syracuse University Press, 2021). He has led grants from the Qatar National Research Fund, the UK FCDO, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. He serves on the editorial boards of Third World Quarterly, Alternatives: Global, Local, Political, and the Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies.

Nayef Al-Nabet is a Qatari researcher working on Gulf politics and security, the foreign policy of small states, and AI governance. He is Affiliate Faculty at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University (USA), and a Nonresident Fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs in Doha. In January 2027 he begins doctoral research at Durham University on the agency of small states in the international governance of AI, with Qatar as a case study. He spent two years as a Junior Professional Officer at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs in New York. There he supported intergovernmental processes on sustainable development, including the High-Level Political Forum, and helped coordinate preparations for the World Summit for Social Development held in Doha in November 2025. He also contributed policy analysis on how small states engage in multilateral AI governance. He holds an Executive Master of Diplomacy and International Affairs from Georgetown University in Qatar, a Master of Project Management from the University of Portsmouth with a specialization in risk assessment, and a BSc in Computer Science from Cardiff University. He is a member of the International Law Association GCC Branch and its Committee on AI and Technology Law. His recent work on Gulf digital sovereignty, maritime chokepoints, and strategic restraint has appeared with the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University, and the Fiker Institute. He also writes commentary in Arabic and English, including for Al Jazeera, on Iran, Gulf security, and AI governance. The two directors are co-authoring two book projects, on Israel's security state and on advocacy and influence in the US Congress.