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Workshop No. 4

Beyond the Single Security Guarantor? Emerging Polycentrism Across Scales, Multi-Alignments, and Securitization and Militarization in the Gulf

1. Directors

Javier Bordon
Lancaster University

Sulaiman Alwadai
Naif Arab University for Security Sciences

2. Abstract

For decades, Gulf security rested on the assumption of a reliable US guarantee. That assumption is now contested. Shifts in US domestic politics, a more transactional approach to alliances, uneven responses to attacks on Gulf territory, and regional wars have pushed Gulf states to diversify their security partnerships without abandoning Washington. Rather than a single extra-regional pole reproducing a clear hierarchy under its security umbrella, constellations of actors across scales, with asymmetric capabilities and unequal reach, are forging deeper links and estranging relations – often, simultaneously – in a complex web of multi-alignments and strategic hedging patterns, creating new tensions between interdependence and autonomy. The Saudi-Pakistani Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (2025) and the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement (2026) are clear examples. They sit alongside deeper ties with China, India, the EU, and other powers from outside the region,

as well as evolving coalitions with actors across the broader Middle East and in conflicts in peripheral and adjacent spaces. Against the backdrop of US policy volatility, this workshop interrogates these emerging practices, policies, strategies, alignments, alliances, and arrangements through the lenses of polycentrism, securitization, and militarization in International Relations, exploring the conditions, drivers, processes, outcomes, and implications – or lack thereof – for security and defense as constitutive of order(ing).

• How is the changing US-GCC relationship shaping the emergence of polycentric politics?
• What patterns of (multi)alignment arise and what do they deliver in practice?
• Are these relations informed by securitization and/or militarization dynamics? Who defines the threat, what is threatened, and with what material and ideational consequences? Where are security and military logics defining policy, strategy, agreements, and with whom?
• How are polycentrism and multiplicity amidst securitized and/or militarized relations impacting on the governance of spaces, flows, and peoples within and around the Gulf?

3. Context

For more than four decades, security in the Gulf rested on an implicit bargain with the United States. From the Carter Doctrine to the 1991 Gulf War and beyond, this produced an order in which bilateral ties with Washington shaped Gulf states' defense postures, procurement, and threat perceptions. That bargain has been eroding for some time. The limited US response to the 2019 attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais, the Houthi strikes on Abu Dhabi in 2022, and the Israeli strike on Doha in September 2025 fed a perception in Gulf capitals that American protection had become conditional, selective, and increasingly hostage to Washington's domestic political cycles.

Events since then have turned this slow erosion into an acute test. The US-Israeli war on Iran that began on 28 February 2026 made the Gulf a direct theatre of conflict. Iran declared the Strait of Hormuz closed, commercial traffic collapsed, Gulf territory and facilities hosting US forces came under attack, and a sequence of blockades, ceasefires, and renewed hostilities followed. Washington's posture became openly transactional, as shown by the July 2026 proposal whereby the US would act as a paid 'guardian' of the Strait, first through a levy on cargo and then, after Gulf pushback, through Gulf investment in the US. At the same time, the war in Yemen reignited. From July 2026 the Houthis resumed strikes on Saudi Arabia and declared a blockade of Saudi shipping, and in September they pushed along the Red Sea coast towards Bab al-Mandab while hitting energy infrastructure in the Kingdom's south, precisely when the closure of Hormuz had made the Red Sea a route vital for Saudi exports.

Gulf states have responded not by abandoning Washington but by diversifying around it. The Saudi-Pakistani Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (September 2025) and its extension to Turkey in the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement (August 2026), which treats an attack on one signatory as an attack on all, are the most visible expressions of this diversification. These arrangements coexist with deepening ties to China, India, the EU and other extra-regional powers, with Omani and Qatari mediation, and with continued, if renegotiated, security and arms relations with the United States.

The result is not a tidy shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. It is a crowded and uneven field of overlapping, partial, and sometimes contradictory commitments across scales. Security logics are also spreading beyond conventional defense to ports, pipelines, desalination plants, maritime corridors, data and emerging technologies, while defense localization reshapes economies and institutions. The workshop is situated in this moment, when the question is no longer whether Gulf security is changing but what is emerging in place of the single guarantor.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

Contemporary developments in and around the Gulf are evidencing to a growing number of audiences across the globe that understanding the region and its relations is not a secondary enterprise: instead, it holds immense importance for international relations, security configurations, and military patterns that influence and resonate elsewhere. However, the study of the Gulf and its surroundings, not only as a site of empirical relevance in itself but productive of theoretical reflection and refinement for concepts and approaches in so-called 'mainstream' disciplinary debates, remains persistently marginalized. Proposing polycentrism, multi-alignment, securitization, militarization, and adjacent frameworks as lenses, the workshop seeks an intellectual balance between contributions examining those theories' potentialities and limitations to make sense of empirical developments in/around the Gulf and drawing theoretical lessons for empirical developments elsewhere. Workshop directors will seek such balance between more theoretically leaning and empirically driven contributions as long as there is a clear and compelling connection to the Gulf.

Furthermore, the notions of polycentrism, multi-alignment, and similar abstractions denote an open-ended and ongoing complexity of power-laden arrangements within and across spatialities and temporalities that exists in potential tension with the hardening and exclusionary properties of securitization and militarization dynamics. This tension manifests across levels of analysis, policy portfolios, and areas of life, oftentimes shaping relations beyond where the tension initially formed.

The workshop directors encourage the participation of prospective authors aiming to explore this complexity within and across Gulf Arab states, the GCC as a whole, and/or Iran, Iraq, and Yemen as well as in their external relations:

-To bring into attention the knowledge production potential of the Gulf for major disciplinary debates in International Relations.

-To explore the descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive potential of the concepts of polycentrism and multi-alignment in the study of contemporary political, economic, security, and defense relations in and around the Gulf.

-To unpack the complexity, multi-dimensionality, multi-agentiality, multi-scalarity, and multi-temporality of securitization and militarization conditions, processes, and implications pertaining to the Gulf Arab states, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen.

-To ascertain the extent of the correlation between the US's transactional and tributarian policy towards Gulf partners and the latter's evolution of strategies in foreign, diplomatic, security, defense, and economic policy.

-To draw recommendations and guidance for multiple stakeholders that is relevant to policy action.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

The workshop welcomes both theoretically oriented and empirically grounded papers, including comparative work across GCC states, Iran, Iraq and Yemen, on topics such as:

-US domestic politics, transactionalism, and alliance credibility; and how the domestic politics of external guarantors shape Gulf threat perceptions and securitization and militarization dynamics.

-Hedging, multi-alignment, and polycentric security: conceptual potential, limits, and Gulf cases.

-The Saudi-Pakistani agreement, the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement, and other emerging arrangements: drivers, content, and performance when tested.

-Gulf security and defense relations with China, India, Turkey, the EU, and other extra-regional powers.

-Arms transfers, defense-industrial localization, co-production, and technology transfer.

-The securitization and militarization of spaces and flows: maritime corridors (Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, the Red Sea) and critical infrastructure, such as energy facilities, ports, pipelines, desalination plants, and/or data.

-The Yemen–Red Sea nexus and its links to the Horn of Africa.

-Energy and nuclear security.

-Trade-offs between militarized protection and economic diversification, logistics, and geoeconomic strategy.

-Iranian, Iraqi, and Yemeni perspectives on the changing Gulf order.

-The governance of spaces, flows, and peoples (migration, labor, food and water) in securitized environments.

-Discourses, media, and publics in the construction of threats and alliances.

6. Publication Plans

The contributions to the workshop will be published in an edited book volume as first choice. Workshop directors will engage in discussion with Manchester University Press and the editors of the book series 'Identities and Geopolitics in the Middle East', which would feature a GRC acknowledgement and benefit from an edited volume focusing on Gulf contemporary dynamics with theoretical and empirical contributions as the ones outlined in this workshop. Other prospective alternative publishers include Routledge, Palgrave, or other top university presses.

As contingency plan, the contributions to the workshop will be published as part of a special issue in Q1-ranked academic journals such as The International Spectator, Contemporary Security Policy, Middle East Policy, Contemporary Security Policy, or Global Policy. Workshop directors will pursue publication options bearing in mind one of the workshop's main goals is to bring Gulf studies closer to major debates in disciplinary IR and security and military studies.

7. References

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8. Workshop Directors

Dr. Javier Bordón is a Fellow and Project Coordinator with the Sectarianism, Proxies, De-Sectarianization (SEPAD) project based at Lancaster University, UK. He completed his PhD at Lancaster in late 2026. His work lies at the intersection of International Relations, Middle East Studies, and Critical Social Theory, with particular interest in the interplay between security, identity, and order and its empirical manifestations. His broader research interests include geopolitics, critical security studies, foreign policy, religion and politics, and state/society relations in the Middle Eastern and North African context, with particular focus on Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Yemen, and Egypt. He has been visiting researcher at the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) and King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) as well as held teaching positions at Lancaster University and Complutense University of Madrid.

Sulaiman Alwadai is a Researcher in Geopolitical and Social Dynamics at the Security Research Center of Naif Arab University for Security Sciences (NAUSS), Saudi Arabia. His work lies at the intersection of International Relations, Middle East Studies, and Security Studies, with particular interest in how political structures, social change, and regional power dynamics shape security and order. His broader research interests include Gulf and Iranian foreign policy, great-power involvement in the Middle East, US domestic politics and their regional effects, Gulf–Levant relations, and the implications of emerging security technologies. He previously worked as a researcher at the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) and as National Advisor to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Saudi Arabia. He holds master's degrees from Columbia University and King Saud University and has published in the Journal for Iranian Studies, with NAUSS, and in Arabic outlets including Thmanyah and Independent Arabia.