Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

17th Gulf Research Meeting

Cambridge, 20-22 July 2027

Workshop No. 6

Rethinking GCC Regionalism: Interdependence, Shared Challenges and Cooperation in the Gulf

1. **Directors**

Mohammed Alotaibi
Alfaisal University & UNU-CRIS

Philippe De Lombaerde
UNU-CRIS

2. **Abstract**

People and businesses across the Gulf depend on connections that cross national borders: food supplies, energy networks, shipping routes, investment, workers and digital services. However, cooperation varies widely across these areas. This workshop asks why Gulf states cooperate successfully on some shared challenges but struggle to do so on others. Focusing on the six GCC states, it examines who depends on whom, how these relationships are governed, and what happens when cooperation is tested. Iran, Iraq, Yemen and external partners are included where they are important to understanding a particular Gulf relationship. The workshop examines GCC cooperation on its own terms rather than against a model of political union. It asks what different arrangements achieve in practice, whose needs they serve, and how they can become more reliable.

3. **Context**

Regional cooperation matters most when people need it to work. Keeping essential goods moving, maintaining reliable energy supplies, protecting digital services and enabling trade and mobility all involve relationships that cross national borders. The GCC provides an

established setting for cooperation, but Gulf economies and societies are also connected through businesses, workers, investment, infrastructure, and relationships with partners outside the region. These connections do not always follow the same political or institutional boundaries. Research on Gulf political economy and regionalism has shown both the depth of these connections and the limits of formal integration (Hanieh 2018; Alotaibi 2026a, 2026b). Comparative regionalism provides a useful way to understand this variation. Regional cooperation does not have to follow a single path towards political union. Physical connections, trade, common rules and joint decisions can develop at different speeds and in different combinations. An electricity connection, for example, does not by itself create a functioning regional market, while a focused agreement may solve a shared problem without requiring deeper political integration (De Lombaerde et al. 2011; De Lombaerde 2024).

This workshop therefore focuses on what cooperation actually does. It asks how relationships among states, firms, infrastructure and communities are governed, who carries responsibility, and what happens when normal arrangements come under pressure. It also considers dependence and vulnerability. Being an important hub does not automatically give an actor power, and depending on a connection does not necessarily create vulnerability if alternatives are readily available (Farrell and Newman 2019).

The workshop builds on UNU-CRIS research on comparative and differentiated regionalism and its planned evolution into UNU Regions. It will deepen the study of GCC regionalism while connecting Gulf experience to wider debates about how regions cooperate. Recent GRM workshops have examined infrastructure connectivity, economic competition, and hybrid threats. This workshop brings these questions together around a simpler problem: Why does cooperation work in some areas of Gulf life but remain difficult in others?

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The workshop will develop a comparative account of how cooperation works across the Gulf, where it falls short, and what explains the difference. Rather than asking whether the GCC is sufficiently integrated, it will examine how Gulf states manage specific relationships and shared problems in practice. Five questions will guide the papers and discussion. First, how are Gulf states connected? Papers will identify the relationships that matter for a particular shared function, including the states, firms, communities and external partners involved. They will distinguish dependence within the Gulf from dependence on global suppliers and partners. Second, why does cooperation work in some areas but not others? Papers will compare arrangements that deliver results with those that remain limited or are bypassed. Explanations may include political trust, competing interests, regulatory differences, institutional capacity, and the distribution of costs and

benefits. Third, when does interdependence create power or vulnerability? Papers will examine who can influence access to essential services, markets or routes, who bears the consequences, and whether alternatives, reserves, or other arrangements reduce dependence. Fourth, what happens when connections are disrupted? Diplomatic disputes, supply interruptions, maritime disruption, cyber incidents and other shocks can reveal how cooperation works under pressure. Papers will examine how actors respond, whether problems spread across sectors, and whether temporary responses
produce lasting changes. Fifth, what forms of cooperation are workable? The workshop will examine where stronger coordination could help, where existing arrangements already work, and where national action remains sufficient. It does not assume that more integration is always the answer. Comparative case studies, historical research, institutional analysis, process tracing and network methods are all welcome. The aim is to bring different approaches into a common conversation and build a clearer picture of how GCC regionalism works in practice. The workshop will also produce a short policy recommendations document.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

We welcome papers on GCC institutions and how regional rules and agreements work in practice; trade, investment, finance and economic interdependence; labour mobility, migration and cross-border communities; energy cooperation and electricity networks; food and water security; ports, shipping, transport and logistics; digital infrastructure, data and cross-border services; environmental and climate cooperation; maritime and regional security; external powers and strategic partnerships; firms and other non-state actors in regional cooperation; hubs, chokepoints and unequal dependence; and the effects of diplomatic disputes, conflict, sanctions, cyber incidents and supply disruptions.

Papers may also examine how Gulf states adapt to disruption and whether crises lead to new forms of cooperation. Comparative studies across GCC states, sectors, periods or institutional arrangements are particularly encouraged. Studies involving Iran, Iraq, Yemen or external actors are welcome where they help explain GCC regionalism. Network analysis is welcome but not required. Each paper should identify its question, relevant relationships, time period, governing arrangements, evidence and outcome. A focused case should explain its wider Gulf significance.

6. Publication Plans

The directors propose a joint open-access institutional research report provisionally titled *Rethinking GCC Regionalism: Interdependence and Cooperation in the Gulf,* to be published collaboratively by UNU-CRIS, and GRCC, subject to institutional agreement and GRC approval. The report will bring as many suitable workshop papers as possible

into a common account of how regional cooperation works across the Gulf. A provisional structure is:

(1) Introduction: Rethinking GCC Regionalism
(2) GCC Institutions and the Practice of Cooperation
(3) Economic and Social Interdependence
(4) Energy, Infrastructure and Essential Services
(5) Power, External Actors and Strategic Dependence
(6) Disruption, Adaptation and Institutional Learning
(7) Conclusion: What Gulf Experience Tells Us about Regional Cooperation

Individual chapters will address common questions about relationships, institutions, responsibilities and outcomes, allowing comparison across different sectors and countries. The directors propose a joint open-access report by UNU-CRIS, and GRCC, subject to GRC approval and institutional agreement. GRCC will retain copyright, and the report will meet its acknowledgement and DOI requirements. If the report is not approved or feasible, the directors will consult GRC on alternatives. Papers not included in the report may be developed for peer-reviewed journals or, where appropriate, published by GRC as separate papers. The directors will review drafts in June 2027. Authors will receive feedback by 31 July and submit revisions by 20 September, with publication submissions planned for 30 September 2027. All outputs will follow GRC/GRCC requirements.

7. References

Alotaibi, Mohammed. 2026a. The GCC as a Regional Operating System: Differentiated Sovereignty and the Future of Gulf Regionalism to 2030. UNU-CRIS Working Paper.

Alotaibi, Mohammed. 2026b. Separate Markets, Shared Shield: Designing a New Operating System for GCC Regionalism. UNU-CRIS Policy Brief.

De Lombaerde, Philippe, ed. 2024. Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration. Edward Elgar.

De Lombaerde, Philippe, Renato Flôres, Lelio Iapadre and Michael Schulz, eds. 2011. The Regional Integration Manual: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods. Routledge.

Farrell, Henry, and Abraham L. Newman. 2019. “Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion.” International Security 44(1): 42–79.

Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., Miles Kahler and Alexander H. Montgomery. 2009. “Network Analysis for International Relations.” International Organization 63(3): 559–592.

Hanieh, Adam. 2018. Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East. Cambridge University Press.

8. Workshop Directors

Mohammed Alotaibi is a Research Fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), a Guest Senior Research Scholar at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), and an Adjunct Professor at Alfaisal University in Riyadh. He is a Saudi policy practitioner and scholar with more than twenty years of experience in public policy, regulation, innovation and digital transformation. He previously served as Governor of Saudi Arabia's Research, Development and Innovation Authority and Deputy Governor of the Communications, Space and Technology Commission. His

research focuses on statecraft, governance, institutional learning, complexity, systems analysis and regional cooperation. At UNU-CRIS, his recent work examines GCC regionalism and the governance of cross-border strategic and digital systems. His 2026 publications include The GCC as a Regional Operating System: Differentiated Sovereignty and the Future of Gulf Regionalism to 2030 and Separate Markets, Shared Shield: Designing a New Operating System for GCC Regionalism. He holds a PhD and MS in Engineering and Public Policy from Carnegie Mellon University and an MS in Electrical Engineering from the University of Pennsylvania.

Philippe De Lombaerde is Director of the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS). He previously served as Acting Director, Associate Director and Research Fellow at UNU-CRIS and has held academic positions at NEOMA Business School, Universidad Nacional de Colombia and the University of Antwerp. His research spans comparative regionalism, regional integration, international economics, governance and the measurement of regional cooperation. He has led and contributed to research and policy projects for national governments, UN agencies, the World Bank, the European Commission and regional organizations. His extensive publication record includes The Regional Integration Manual: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods, The Political Economy of New Regionalisms in the Pacific Rim, and the 2024 Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration. He holds a PhD from RWTH Aachen and studied economics, econometrics and political science.