



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 8

# The Gulf States and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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### Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are an important yet overlooked actor in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The workshop intends to examine the many areas in which the Gulf States have been involved in this conflict as well as take an in-depth look at the state of Gulf-Palestinian relations. Ultimately, the workshop aims to further integrate the Gulf States into the larger narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict in its many facets.

### Description and Rationale

While Israel's neighboring countries—Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon—have been more prominently involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf States have played an increasingly important, yet understudied role. In light of the changing regional dynamics in the post-Arab Spring era that led the GCC to claim an unprecedented position of leadership in Arab affairs, it is to be expected that the Gulf States would also exert a

greater role in the dynamics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although the conflict has been overshadowed in the past few years by many regional conflicts and civil wars—from Libya to Yemen and Syria—and despite the failed American-brokered attempt at resuming negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, the historical “Arab cause” is never fully absent from the politics of the region.

As the richest region in the Arab world with ever-growing influence, the GCC states, collectively and individually, have been increasingly involved in Palestinian affairs. This greater involvement is bound to continue in the current situation. Trying to take a lead on the question, Saudi Arabia proposed an “Arab Peace Initiative” in 2002 (reaffirmed in 2007) that made the recognition of Israel by Arab states conditional upon the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. In recent times, Qatar has particularly emerged as a key player with its mediation efforts between Fatah and Hamas in addition to conspicuous support towards Gaza’s development and reconstruction.

Hence the workshop will evaluate how the GCC states contribute to and influence the current state of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. One key angle of their foreign policy is financial aid to the Palestinian Authority or other Palestinian organizations. For example, Saudi Arabia allocated \$500 million to finance development projects during the 2007 International Donors’ Conference for the Palestinian State, while Kuwait and Saudi Arabia fund a significant part of the Palestinian Authority’s budget. Therefore, determining the overall impact of GCC funding, under different guises (aid, development projects, investments) will be one of the questions addressed.

While the greater significance of the GCC as a bloc is true at a regional level, it would be essential to distinguish the foreign policy of the six different countries. As a matter of fact, they do not necessarily converge, with Qatar and Saudi Arabia diverging on the degree to which they interact with Hamas, while the UAE has its own take in the Palestinian infighting.

Another area of research involves the international relations dynamics of conflict. One research question emerging from this is what influence the prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict has on the Gulf States and how does it impact their foreign policies towards other non-Arab countries. For instance, how do close US-Israeli ties complicate the strategic US-Gulf relations, and what are the repercussions? In the context of recent unilateral recognitions of a Palestinian state by various European parliaments, does the GCC have any role or mechanisms to support such moves?

Furthermore, the GCC-Iranian rivalry, which is much more central to the Gulf States than the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, means competition with Iran in creating spheres of

influence in the region—Palestine being no exception. These spheres of influence have dire consequences in undermining Palestinian unity, and ultimately the Palestinian cause—something both rivals claim to champion. So the follow up question here is: how do GCC attempts to create a sphere of influence—support for Fatah and the alienation of Hamas (Qatar being an exception)—contribute to the Palestinian divide?

On the other hand, the Arab Peace Initiative was spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and remains a focal point of any roadmap to peace with Israel from the perspective of Arab and Islamic regional organizations. What is the status of the initiative? Why has Israel not reacted to the initiative and for how long will it be on the table before a push towards a different policy? Moreover, can shared security interests between GCC countries and Israel (towards Iran in particular) see the emergence of relations despite the continued occupation of Palestinian territories? What can we make of recent announcements of an Israeli diplomatic mission in the UAE (accredited to IRENA), and a former Saudi General's visit to Jerusalem?

Last but not least, the workshop will also address the gap between public opinion and state foreign policy vis-à-vis the conflict, ultimately shedding light on a core IR question on the link between foreign policy imperatives and domestic constraints. With many developments, a workshop dedicated to understanding the Gulf connection in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is warranted, perhaps more than ever before.

### **Contribution to the Future of Gulf Studies**

The workshop engages an area that has been significantly overlooked in Gulf studies. The workshop and its edited volume will help bridge a major gap in Gulf studies and the wider area of Middle East studies as it further integrates a missing part of the Arab-Israeli conflict—the Gulf States. Currently, no such comprehensive work on the topic exists, and the workshop and its output would prove to be an invaluable foundation towards developing this research track.

### **Anticipated Participants**

The workshop aims to engage a wide scholarly audience across the social science spectrum to produce an overarching framework that helps integrate the Gulf States' involvement and role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It anticipates the participation of scholars from the following fields:

Political science, history, international relations, security and diplomatic studies, international political economy, international law, sociology and anthropology.

The interdisciplinary engagement is aimed at producing a series of papers to be published in an edited volume that will give the most comprehensive look on the different ways the Gulf States interact in the conflict. The framework includes (but is not limited to) the following areas and topics:

**1) Gulf-Palestinian Relations**

- Supporting the Palestinian bid to statehood in the UN and assisting in their recognition across other international forums
- Economic and financial aid to the Palestinian Authority
- Contributions to Palestinian refugee relief works and reconstructing destroyed areas
- Investments in Palestine
- Palestinian communities in the Gulf
- Legacy of the 1990-91 Gulf War

**2) Peace and Conflict**

- An assessment of the Saudi-led Arab Peace Initiative
- GCC-wide diplomatic support for the Palestinian agenda
- The role of the Gulf countries in peace talks and other mediation efforts
- The post-Arab Spring situation and its impact on Gulf support
- The impact of the conflict on domestic factors including terrorism
- The Israeli-US friendship and its consequences of US-Gulf relations

**3) The Gulf States and Israel**

- The GCC and the boycott movement
- Diplomatic pressures on Israel including: ending the occupation, curtailment of settlements, and having a nuclear free Middle East
- Assessing avenues of Gulf-Israeli cooperation especially in regional security and economic relations
- Reflection on failed diplomatic attempts like commercial offices in Qatar and Oman
- Domestic discourse on Israel in the Gulf States (objections to recognition)
- Discourse in Israel on Gulf relations (reasons behind the absence of an official reaction to the Arab Peace Initiative)

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Suliman Al-Atiqi** is a PhD Candidate at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and a researcher on the GCC states. He is the Committee Chairman of the Oxford Gulf &

Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum and the Managing Editor of its journal, *Gulf Affairs*. Suliman previously served as an analyst for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) where he led the “Barriers and Opportunities at the Base of the Pyramid” research program and report. He holds an MA in Psychology from Columbia University specializing in social and political psychology, and an MA in International Affairs from Florida State University specializing in international relations and the GCC region. He is a regular contributor to Carnegie Endowment’s *Sada*.

**Dr. Claire Beaugrand** is a researcher at the Institut Français du Proche Orient (Ifpo) in the Occupied Palestinian territories branch, since June 2013, where she is investigating Gulf investments and aid policies in Palestine. She earned her PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and her doctoral thesis, under the supervision of late Professor Halliday on the emergence and persistence of statelessness in Kuwait, is in the process of being published by I.B. Tauris. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, she worked as a Gulf Senior analyst for the International Crisis Group (ICG). She is also a core researcher in the European Research Council-funded program called *WFAW (When Authoritarianism Fails in the Arab World)* led by François Burgat.

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