



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 5

# Iraq and Arab Gulf Countries: Rapprochement?

### Workshop Directors:

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### Abstract

Arab Gulf countries have a long and complex relationship with Iraq, which borders Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In the backdrop of the announced military defeat of ISIS in Iraq, the country is scheduled to hold elections in 2018 which could significantly influence the future of Iraq-GCC relations. This workshop will bring together scholars to assess the future of Iraq in relation to Arab Gulf states. The issues to be addressed include relations with the Kurdish Regional Government, rebuilding areas once occupied by ISIS, the fight against the violent extremism, the role of Iranian-backed militias in the Iraqi Security Forces, Iraq's role in OPEC and the potential for increasing political ties between Iraq and Gulf States. Iraq has been at the heart of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for decades. Iraqi-Arab Gulf relations will shape the future security and economic development of the region.

## **Description and Rationale**

This workshop will be devoted to analysis of Arab Gulf states relations with Iraq. There is a long history of political, social, military and economic relations between Iraq and Arab Gulf states. The Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US invasion of Iraq and subsequent Iranian infiltration of Iraq and the ISIS takeover of nearly half of Iraq's territory starting in 2014 have defined Iraq-Gulf relations. But with the military defeat of ISIS, the election of Donald Trump as US president, the ascension of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and the resilience of the dynamic Iraqi political scene have opened a new chapter to Iraq-Gulf relations that requires fresh analysis due to the changing environment. The main objective of this workshop is to bring together a range of regional scholars to assess and analyze the relevant factors for political and economic stability in Iraq and its future relations with Gulf States. The future of Gulf States will be determined by its relations with Iraq more than any other regional country.

A number of factors are shaping a new chapter in Iraq-Gulf relations. First is the recent rapprochement between Iraqi political leaders and Gulf leaders. This includes the 2015 reopening of the Saudi embassy in Iraq after 25 years of being closed, visits of Prime Minister (PM) Haider al-Abadi to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE in June and October 2017, the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir to Baghdad in February 2017 (the first visit by a Saudi Foreign Minister to Iraq since 1990), the visit of Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr to Gulf states in the summer of 2017, and the establishment of the Saudi-Iraq coordination council.

Second is the increasing role of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq's security force structure and their role in the military defeat of ISIS and the retaking of Kirkuk and disputed areas from Kurdish Peshmerga forces in October 2017. The Hashid al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), was created in 2014 with the strong backing of the Shiite religious establishment to confront the spread of ISIS forces and were used in the fight to retake areas occupied by ISIS until November 2017. While not all PMF units are Shiite or Iranian-backed—for example, PMF units in Anbar, a majority Sunni province, are led by local Sunni Arab commanders—there is an increasing infiltration of Shiite militias associated with PMF into Sunnis areas. Perceptions of Iranian infiltration in Sunni areas increase distrust of Sunni populations of the Iraqi Security Forces and Sunni Arab's attachment to the national identity. Iranian infiltration into Iraq's security structure, and in particular into Sunni areas, will affect Gulf states' propensity to deepen its relationship with the Iraqi government, similar to Gulf states' complex relationship with the Lebanese

government, where an Iranian-backed militia is also an essential player in the government's strategic policy making.

A third factor shaping the new chapter of Iraq-Gulf relations is economic ties, in particular oil production and investment. Iraq is expected to produce up to 5 million barrels of oil per day by the end of 2017. This is a significant share of oil produced in OPEC and it is expected to continue to rise. The Saudi Minister of Oil gave a rare public speech in Baghdad in October 2017 extolling the developing economic ties between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Iraqi cooperation in oil production will be the pillar of stability in oil markets, as they are the two largest oil producers in OPEC and hold its largest oil reserves in the region.

A fourth factor shaping a new chapter in Iraq-Gulf relations is a recent push to de-emphasize sectarian differences, increase religious dialogue and promote moderation. Whether this new effort will influence social and political ties remains to be seen, however the recent visits of Iraqi religious leaders to Arab Gulf states and statements made by Arab Gulf state and Iraqi officials provide encouragement that a long-awaited rapprochement between GCC countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, and Iraq could materialize.

## **Anticipated Participants**

As discussed above there are many current and dynamic aspects to the Arab Gulf-Iraq relationship that affect regional and international stability and prosperity. These include, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Gulf-Iraq oil relations in the context of OPEC policies and global energy prices
- Geo-political rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia
- The future of ISIS in Iraq
- Post-conflict reconstruction, in particular Mosul
- The Kurdish issue: opportunities and challenges for Gulf-Iraq relations
- The 2018 Iraqi elections
- The future of PMF (Hashid al-Shaabi)
- Economic investment
- Tourism and cultural ties
- Iraq and the Qatar Crisis
- Iraq and the conflict in Yemen
- Iraq-Kuwait relations, Iraq-UAE relations, Iraq-Bahrain relations, etc.

- Iraq-Iran relations
- Religious challenges and opportunities
- International roles in Arab Gulf-Iraq relations (US, Russia, China, India, EU, etc.)

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Dr. Sterling Jensen** is an assistant professor at the UAE's National Defense College (NDC) in Abu Dhabi. Before joining NDC, Sterling was a research associate at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Washington DC. He holds a PhD from King's College London having written completed his dissertation of Iraqi narratives of the Anbar Awakening. He worked for the US government in Iraq from 2006-2011 and is a subject matter expert on the Anbar Awakening and Iraqi political economy. Views expressed in this workshop will be his own and do not represent those of NDC or any other entity.

**Dr. Waleed al-Rawi** is an Iraqi researcher and author of several articles and books about Islamic militant groups and Iraq. His latest book, *The Islamic State of Iraq*, was published in 2012 by Amina House Publishing in Amman, Jordan and has a forthcoming book on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. He is a retired brigadier general in the Iraqi Army. From 2001-2003 he was director of Research and Development at the Ministry of Defense and from 1996-2001 he was the principal secretary of the Minister of Defense. He has been an active member of the Arab Historian Union since 2005.

## Selected Readings

Al-Ubaydli, Omar and Andrea Plebani, ed. (2014), *GCC Relations with Post-War Iraq: A Strategic Perspective*, (Gulf Research Centre Cambridge, Cambridge)

Cordesman, Anthony H. (2017), "After ISIS: Creating Strategic Stability in Iraq," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C.

Gresh, Geoffrey F. (2015). *Gulf Security and the U.S Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford Security Studies, California)

Haddad, Fanar (2011). *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (Hurst, London)

Legrenzi, Matteo (2011). *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, London)

Miller, Rory (2016). *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (Yale University Press, New Haven)

Sky, Emma (2015). *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (PublicAffairs, New York)

Stansfield, Gareth and Mohammed Shareef (2017), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Hurst, London)

Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan (2016) *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts, New York)

Yergin, Daniel (2011) *The Quest: Energy, Security and the Remaking of the Modern World* (Penguin, New York)