



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 5

Emerging Challenges in International Relations and Transnational Politics of the GCC

Workshop Directors:

Dr. Jessie Moritz

Lecturer at the Centre for Arab and
Islamic Studies
Australian National University
Australia
Email: jessie.moritz@anu.edu.au

Dr. Emma Soubrier

Postdoctoral Researcher
Université Clermont Auvergne (UCA)
France
Email: esoubrier@hotmail.fr

Abstract

Over the past 18 months, the geopolitically critical Gulf region has been adjusting to new political, social, economic, and security realities. Traditional understandings of politics in the region – a preference for gradualism, for example – have been challenged by the emergence of a new generation of GCC rulers, who seek to establish legitimacy through ambitious new development or foreign policy regimes. New regional realignments and a stronger rejection of Iranian external interference from the US Administration has also shifted the political and strategic environment in which the GCC states operate. Simultaneously, migration patterns, the transnational diffusion of culture and ideas, and the interconnected nature of social and religious networks in the Gulf have been repurposed by economic development strategies that include a focus on foreign direct investment, global diversification of sovereign wealth fund assets, and the generation of soft power through ownership of traditional and new media outlets.

These changes suggest a reassessment of the state of International Relations and its various sub-fields as applied to the Gulf region is needed. Existing research on the international

political economy of oil, for instance, has focused heavily on the link between oil wealth, external intervention, and violent conflict, with obvious implications for regime stability and state-society relations, but far less so on the influence of international or transnational social and political variables, despite their clear impact following the various Gulf iterations of the Arab Spring. Another example lies in the profuse literature on Gulf security, which still mostly analyses regional issues through the lens of external interests and sensitivities rather than through a focus on the Arab Gulf States' own perception of their strategic environment and on the specific strategies they deploy accordingly, despite considerable evolutions in foreign and security policies of regional leaders which completely redefine the dynamics of bilateral and multilateral relations within the Gulf, and between the Gulf and external actors at the broader regional and global levels.

Within this context, this workshop will offer new insights into the international and transnational relationships that shape contemporary Gulf polities. The selected papers will highlight the interdisciplinary nature of research on international politics in the Gulf region, drawing from political economy, critical security studies, anthropology, geography, political science, and sociology. They will challenge traditional distinctions between domestic and international spheres, revealing the transnational spread of ideologies, security perceptions, and political attitudes.

With the 10th edition of the Gulf Research Meeting taking place at a time when the Gulf region has faced numerous turbulent years, this workshop will come at a key moment to assess the way in which the Gulf states respond to these new or emerging challenges and the significant ramifications this can have, not only for those seeking to understand contemporary Gulf states, but also for the long-term sustainability and balance of power in this critical region.

Description and Rationale

Objectives

The aim of this workshop is to provide a rigorous rethinking of the connections between the domestic, transnational, and international spheres. As a result, we expect to challenge a number of preconceptions about social, economic, and political dynamics, both in the Gulf region and outside it. How, for example, is the architecture of the rentier state affected by transnational social relationships, including religious networks; and what does this mean for our understanding of the influential literature on rentierism? How do GCC sovereign wealth funds interact, and what does this mean for international capital flows and Gulf development trajectories? How is the paradigm of Gulf security affected or redefined by the empowerment of a growing number of smaller countries in the region, by the highly personalized policymaking processes and international relations within the Arabian Peninsula and with external powers? And how do these policies, focused on the political and military dimensions of security, impact the economic as well as the “softer” dimensions of security, i.e. societal, –human– and environmental security?

This workshop is thus a direct response to a number of literatures that inform our understanding of the GCC states. The work builds on these literatures, challenging traditional assumptions about domestic society, economy, and polity in light of shifting international conditions, offering nuance to those assumptions that are upheld, and alternatives for those assumptions that are not.

The ultimate purpose of this workshop is to publish a collective volume edited by both workshop directors as well as Dr. Courtney Freer. The edited book will be based on the individual papers presented at this workshop and at a previous workshop which took place at the MESA Conference 2018. We intend this volume to represent some of the best scholarship on the interconnectivity between the domestic, transnational, and international spheres.

Scope

The workshop is focused primarily on how shifting regional and international contexts affect the domestic development and politics of the GCC region. In doing so, it hopes to foster a conception of the international, transnational, and domestic spheres as irrevocably connected. Papers on bilateral relationships between the GCC states and other parts of the world are welcome, where these are connected to broader patterns of shifting international relations, but the focus should remain on the impact of these relations for the GCC states. We expect contributors to engage with cross-disciplinary analysis, and that the papers focus on contemporary challenges to the practice or theory of international relations in the Gulf region, particularly those which have occurred in the region over the past decade. As the ultimate goal of this workshop is the publication of an edited volume, a particular attention will be given to the diversity of case studies covered and/or the theoretical frameworks used in the different papers.

Contribution to Gulf Studies

While the literature on international relations and transnational politics in the Gulf is flourishing, several watershed events over the past decade –including, but not limited to, the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the election of Donald Trump, the ongoing wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the unresolved Gulf crisis– make this a timely moment to rethink traditional theoretical approaches and understandings of these topics in the contemporary Middle East.

Anticipated Participants

We expect papers for this workshop may address some of the following topics:

- Sociology of transnational communities
- Shifting international security challenges, including –but not limited to– the proliferation of violent extremism as well as cyber and information security issues
- Evolving Gulf security agendas in the past decade
- Role of external security alliances in GCC security

- Foreign direct investment and shifting foreign policy priorities, for example enhanced cooperation with the East Asian economies
- Labour migration and economic diversification in the post-2014 environment
- Evolving dynamics of the rentier state
- New and emerging regional relationships, for example between the Saudis and nationalist Shia groups in Iraq
- Climate change and international energy politics
- Food and water security issues in the Gulf
- Air, land, and sea transport networks in an era of increased rivalries within the Arabian Peninsula as well as between Iran and the GCC states

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Jessie Moritz is a Lecturer at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University (ANU). She joined the ANU in July 2018 following the completion of a postdoctoral research fellowship with Princeton University's Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa, where she focused on post-2014 economic reform programs in the GCC. She received her PhD from the ANU in March 2017; her dissertation, "Slick Operators: Revising Rentier State Theory for the Modern Arab States of the Gulf," received the 2017 Dissertation Award from the *Association for Gulf and Peninsula Studies*. Jessie has held a number of visiting fellow positions in the Gulf and UK. In March 2018, Jessie was a Visiting Fellow at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, in 2013 she was a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and from 2013-2014 she joined the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University as a Graduate Fellow. Her current research focuses on the political economy of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, with a particular focus on state-society relations and economic diversification strategies.

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Dr. Emma Soubrier is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre Michel de l'Hospital, Université Clermont Auvergne (UCA, France) and a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Middle East Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University (Washington, DC). Her research, which focuses on the reshaping of Gulf security along the new dynamics of foreign and defense policies of the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, is sponsored by the "Ambassador" Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Directorate-General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS, at the French Ministry of Defense).

Emma received her PhD in Political Science from the UCA in December 2017. In March 2018, her thesis, entitled “What security for the “Small Princes-States” of the Gulf? Defense policies and procurement strategies of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates”, received a Dissertation Award from the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies (IHEDN, France). Emma, who also is the head of the International Division at the Center for Security and Defense Studies (CESED), has published numerous articles and book chapters in French and English on Gulf security issues. From 2012 to 2015, her research benefited from a financial support by the Directorate-General for Armament (DGA, at the French MoD) and Airbus Defence & Space (ex Cassidian). In 2013, she was one of the Young Strategists selected by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and Johns Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

Selected Readings

Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds.), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies* (Routledge, 2016)

David DesRoches and Dania Thafer (eds.), *The Arms Trade, Military Services and the Security Market in the Gulf* (Gerlach Press, 2016)

Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East: Old Games, New Rules* (Routledge, 2007)

F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

David Held and Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *The Transformation of the Gulf: Politics, Economics and the Global Order* (Routledge, 2012)

Michael Hudson and Mimi Kirk (eds.), *Gulf Politics and Economics in a Changing World* (World Scientific, 2014)

Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *The Political Economy of the Persian Gulf* (Hurst, 2012)

Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (IB Tauris, 2015)

Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (Palgrave, 2016)