



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 12

Iran and the GCC: Prospects for Change?

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Abstract

Iran and the GCC countries have been at the center of attention since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Although there have been periods of relative calm in Iran-GCC relations, the main trend has been full of reciprocal accusations of internal interference, rupture of diplomatic relations, and undeclared proxy wars. Conflictive issues remain unsolved, like the Iranian claim on Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands. More important are three enduring questions: leadership in the Islamic world; defining spheres of influence; and the issue of a regional security arrangement (with or without the United States).

The emergence of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 generated a new wave of tensions between the Islamic Republic and the GCC states, mainly with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Both countries, plus Qatar, tried to benefit from the new conflictive situations in the countries that had undergone – or are still undergoing – transformative changes in their political make-up. In particular, Syria has become the main arena of strategic and ideological disputes among the three contenders. Egypt (both under President Morsi and after the 'corrective' military intervention) has drawn attention from its respective

supposed benefactors, as has Bahrain, though in a different way. Less visible, though not less important, are Saudi-Iranian rivalries in the Yemen theatre.

Tensions have been building up, mainly illustrated by several Saudi accusations of Iranian involvement. To name a few: First, Riyadh accused Tehran of having orchestrated a plot to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C. Second, Iran was blamed for being involved in the Bahraini popular revolt (and even having ‘annexation’ plans). Third, in its fight against the Shia uprising in the Eastern Province, the Saudi authorities claimed to have dismantled an Iranian ‘espionage network’. Though tension between Sunni and Shia has been on the rise since the war in Iraq in 2003, sectarian frictions have become paramount in recent years. Arguably, Saudi Arabia is leading Arab-Sunni governments against a Shia ‘invasion’ of the GCC and the rest of the Middle East.

In the meantime, negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 have led to an accord. The agreement, which – most importantly – signals an improvement of relations between the US and Iran, will reduce some of the sanction pressure on Iran in exchange for limits on the enrichment program and more intrusive inspections by the IAEA. Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states have cautiously welcomed the nuclear deal. Whether this will be beneficial for bilateral trade, being a source for the improvement in mutual confidence, is an open question. In any case, the implementation of the latest round of sanctions, before the Geneva accord was reached, had drastically affected Iranian trade volumes from and to the GCC countries, damaging not only the Iranian economy, but the UAE too.

The objective of the workshop is to address several related questions: How did (and do) the events of the Arab Spring and the recent rapprochement between Iran/US/IAEA affect Iran-GCC bilateral relations? And, more focused, which factors might contribute to reduce the tensions in the Gulf region?

Workshop Description and Rationale

Possible related sub-questions will be:

- To what extent are Saudi Arabia’s fears about a possible rapprochement between Tehran and Washington justified? Would it represent a negative factor in the privileged relation between the US and Saudi Arabia?
- Would, on the contrary, this possible rapprochement represent a positive influence on Iranian-Saudi relations?
- Will the election of Hassan Rouhani as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran bring new perspectives for a thaw in Saudi-Iranian relations (or is, in the words of a Saudi commentator, the difference between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani not much more than the difference between ‘Coca-Cola and Pepsi’)?

- Like during the Khatami's presidency, is it possible that there will be new confidence building measures from the Iranian side that could convince the GCC states?
- Is a common GCC policy towards Iran really possible?
 - To what extent is Oman an 'outlier' when it comes to its relations with Iran?
 - Would the new Amir of Qatar represent a change in the orientation of Qatari foreign policy towards Iran?
 - Could Qatar play a mediator role in GCC-Iran relations?
- Is it possible to think about security in the Gulf without the presence of US troops?
 - What about a more integrated security framework between Iran and the GCC? Is this a fata morgana?
- Would the ease of sanctions positively affect the commercial links between Iran and the GCC states?
 - Could Iran even become a 'privileged commercial partner' of the GCC countries?
- Would a new nuclear deal encourage the GCC countries to accelerate their own nuclear programmes?
- Is it possible to think about a 'nuclear cooperation' between Iran and the GCC countries?
- Could the Gulf's environmental concerns play a role in activating cooperative policies among Iran and the GCC countries?

Other questions we would like to address in the workshop would be:

- Is sectarianism the main driver of regional politics? Is it possible to diminish its importance as a conflictive factor?
- How coherent is the 'Sunni' side in this conflict?
- Has the strategic balance in the Gulf region shifted since the start of the Arab uprisings? Has Iran's position been weakened (apart from its standing in Iraq and Afghanistan)?
- Has the Iranian regime's view of the Arab revolts as an 'Islamic awakening', thus as the continuation of its Islamic Revolution of 1979, had any impact in the Arab world (and the GCC states in particular)?

- To what extent has Iran's Green Movement been influenced by the Arab uprisings?
- How does the Saudi-Iranian rivalry play out in Yemen? And in Syria and Iraq?
- What is the role of national-sponsored media, such as Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera and Press TV in covering the Arab uprisings and the ensuing developments elsewhere in the region?

Anticipated Papers

The proposed workshop aims to have a multidisciplinary character, mainly influenced by political science and international relations – but not necessarily limited to these two disciplines. The focus can vary from case studies, including comparative analysis, to more theoretical approaches. We encourage papers that propose alternative measures to improve relations between Iran and the GCC countries. Of special interest will be papers based on empirical observations, which could demonstrate the benefits of a more cooperative foreign policy in the commercial, economic, political, environmental and security fields.

Workshop Director Profiles

Paul Aarts is senior lecturer in international relations in the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the politics of the Arab world, with a specific focus on the Gulf countries. He has published several edited volumes and numerous articles in different academic journals, including *Democracy & Society*, *Orient*, *Middle East Policy*, *International Spectator*, *Review of International Affairs*, and *Middle East Report*. He is co-author (with Gerd Nonnemann) of “Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs” (London/New York: Hurst & Company/New York University Press, 2005/2006). The updated Arabic edition was published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut (http://www.caus.org.lb/Home/publication_popup.php?ID=4763&MediaID=1). In 2013, he co-edited, with Francesco Cavatorta, “Civil Society in Syria and Iran. Activism in Authoritarian Contexts” (Lynne Rienner). Last year, he finished a report “From Resilience to Revolt. Making Sense of the Arab Spring” available via (<http://wodc.nl/onderzoeksdatabase/duiding-maatschappelijke-omwentelingen-in-noord-afrika-en-het-midden-oosten.aspx>). More on: <http://medewerker.uva.nl/p.w.h.aarts>.

Luciano Zaccara is visiting assistant professor at Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service in Qatar (<http://explore.georgetown.edu/people/lz298/?PageTemplateID=340>). His research focuses on the political and electoral systems in Iran and the GCC countries as well as international politics in the Gulf. He has published an edited volume on elections in Middle East and North Africa (in Spanish, “Elecciones sin eleccion. Procesos electorales

en Oriente Medio y Magreb”), and numerous articles and a monograph on Iranian politics and foreign policy (mainly in Spanish and Latin American journals). He is the founder and director of the Spanish project Observatory on Politics and Elections in Arab and Muslim Countries (OPEMAM) composed of more than twenty researchers (<http://opemam.org/user/118>). He is also honorary research fellow at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK.

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