



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 9

The Gulf Post-Syrian-Crisis Political Architecture and the Roles of the External Actors: the USA, Russia and China

Workshop Directors:

Prof. Alexey Vasiliev
Honorary President
Institute for African Studies of the
Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS)
Member of RAS
Russia
Email: dir@inafr.ru

Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib
Executive Director
Al Istishari Al Strategy for Economic
and Future Studies
United Arab Emirates
Email: danial.koleilat.khatib@gmail.com

Abstract

In the crisis-ridden Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region the contemporary situation, created as a result of the “Arab spring” as well as the Syrian and Iraqi crises, is approaching a new phase. The issue of the future socio-political structure of Syria and Iraq as well as of the influence of events therein on the situation in the Gulf region has come to the forefront. Under the circumstances the role of so significant external players as the USA, Russia and China can hardly be overrated. At the same time, their power and importance are changing. The workshop looks at the Arab Spring namely at the war in Syria and the unrest in Iraq and examines the roles of China the US and Russia as well as the roles of regional players namely Arab Gulf countries and Iran. The workshop also sees how those disturbances in Iraq and Syria have inflicted a new pattern of behaviour on Arab Gulf countries as well as Iran. The Arab Spring has allowed Iran to take a more proactive role and to engage engaging with the Shia communities in the Arab world. On

the other hand amid American retrenchment, Arab Gulf countries adopted a more assertive foreign policy while trying to forge alliances with new international players such as Russia. The workshop also seeks to analyse and compare the foreign relations patterns of the three mentioned powers (USA, Russia and China) with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Iraq, Syria and Iran by framing these relations against shifting global dynamics as well as the ongoing regional conflicts. Overall, the workshop will contribute to critically discussing works on foreign policy analysis by filling the gap in the literature on the contemporary foreign relations of the Gulf countries and providing new insights into a pivotal topic for the future of the MENA region and the GCC countries in particular.

Description and Rationale

In the crisis-ridden MENA region the contemporary situation, created as a result of the “Arab spring” as well as the Syrian and Iraqi crises, is approaching a new phase. The issue of the future socio-political structure of Syria and Iraq as well as of the influence of events therein on the situation in the Gulf region has come to the forefront. Under the circumstances, some of the most significant external players in the region – the USA, Russia and China – together with the European Union (EU), Great Britain and others are maintaining very important roles, though their power and ranking are shifting.

USA

Lately the USA guarded the tradition of being the principal external force in Gulf, though this role is challenged by Iran. The US positions are based on their economic influence, traditional links with the GCC states, solid military presence (large bases in Bahrain, Qatar, etc.) together with the willingness to deploy their armed forces for the protection of the US interests as perceived by Washington.

At the same time the future US role in the Gulf region is questionable. First of all, the centre of American military-political interests has shifted to the Pacific region, where the growing Chinese power has already challenged the predominance of the USA over the Far East and the South-East Asia. Secondly, due to the shale revolution the USA is not only losing interest in the oil supplies from the Gulf region to a great extent, but is itself becoming a big exporter of hydrocarbons and thus competitor with the GCC members in the world energy markets. However, even under these circumstances it is next to impossible to suppose that the USA may become altogether disinterested in the Gulf regional problems. The US failure in Iraq, and the problems that emerged from this

failure have killed the American public, as well political elite appetite for active engagement in the region.

The American invasion in Iraq has sparked the Sunni Shia clashes that intensified with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The sectarian tension creates another factor complicating the stabilisation of the region. This conflict initiated by the American invasion to Iraq has snowballed and resulted in a new wave of international terrorism that threatens the West. The Islamic State represents its manifestation. Despite this fact and despite American retrenchment, any national and regional programs of socio-economic development, especially those introducing various innovations in this field, anticipate very active participation of American investments, knowledge, expertise, and specialists as prerequisites to their success.

Another sudden, unpredictable element is the decision of president Trump's administration to question the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, known commonly as Iran nuclear deal), which from the Russian, European and some other points of view is among the most important factors of the future security in the Gulf as well as in the MENA. On the other hand the GCC states do not see the nuclear deal as a mean to achieve stability. They see the deal as empowering Iran and giving her financial means to promote her ideological project in the region. According to GCC members, the JCPOA did not have any political clauses, and did not put any restraints on Iran's proactive behaviour in exchange for normalisation.

Russia

The present economic capacities of Russia do not allow it to be a primary player in the Gulf region. Notwithstanding these drawbacks the Russian Federation remains quite competitive in some of modern technological fields, and is capable to take part e.g. in the development of atomic energy electrical generation plants in Saudi Arabia and other Arab states of the Gulf. Similar Russian bilateral co-operation with Iran in mutual atomic energy projects has reached a rather advanced level already. The Russian Federation is also highly interested in attracting foreign investments into its economy, including investments from the Gulf States. There are also some positive examples in this field, e.g. mutual projects with Qatar.

Despite limited economic capacities Russian reinforcement in the MENA region as a power, which has been ready to deploy its military forces to defend its interests (as perceived by Moscow) allows the countries of the region to use the Russian Federation as a symbolic alternative to the (undeniable) American leadership. During the Obama years that were seen as a period of American retrenchment, the Arab Gulf looked at Russia for partnerships. This was embodied by the trade deals as well the UAE Crown Prince visits

to Russia. In the limited framework of exclusively military matters, the Russian Federation is aspiring to be among the suppliers of weapons and military equipment for the Gulf States.

Russia direct military involvement in MENA has been confined to Syria where the Russian military has managed to play a really decisive role of a game changer, explicitly supporting president Basher Al Assad. The question is whether the successful intervention in Syria constitutes a prelude for more active Russian involvement elsewhere in the region?

The Russian Federation has showed motivation to develop co-operation with the countries of the region in the mutual fight against international terrorism. Yet from the GCC states' point of view the Russian Iranian ties are a main point of contention for the Gulf. However, given the pragmatic outlook the Gulf countries adopt they are trying to warm up to the new regional player. In the perspective of the new important Role Russia plays in the region, the workshop examines the potential of future cooperation between Arab Gulf States and the Russian Federation.

China

China is very interested in the supplies of hydrocarbons from the Gulf region, and is aiming at “depoliticised” co-operation with the countries of the Gulf. But simultaneously the very scope of Chinese economic exchanges with the states in the region as well as of Chinese participation in the mutual development projects is proving the increasing weight of China and its matter of fact competition (if not rivalry) with the USA, EU, Great Britain, and other Western countries. Constant declarations about “depoliticised” relationships have not got in the way of supplying weapons, e.g. missile complexes to Saudi Arabia.

Anticipated Participants

Possible issues to be addressed in the workshop include the following:

I. General influence of the new political situation in the Gulf on the policies of regional states.

II. USA

- 1) Traditions of American-Arab co-operation (including education, personal contacts);
- 2) US foreign trade relations with the Gulf states and bi-directional capital flows;
- 3) New role of “oil and natural gas” factor;
- 4) Emerging shift of the centre of gravity in American foreign policy towards the Pacific region;
- 5) Uncertainty caused by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran nuclear deal).
- 6) The US policy in Syria from Obama to Trump

III. Russian Federation

- 1) The quest of Russian Federation to gain a firm foothold in the Middle East as a military actor;
- 2) Economic drawbacks of Russia balanced partly by its capacities to co-operate with the Gulf in the fields of atomic energy, commercial utilization of space, etc.;
- 3) Russian policy of non-interference;
- 4) Development of bi-lateral relations of Russia with the Gulf states;
- 5) Antiterrorist co-operation and alliances of Russia in the MENA;
- 6) Co-operation between Russia and OPEC
- 7) Russian Gulf relation since the Arab Spring

IV. China

- 1) The importance of MENA hydrocarbon resources for China;
- 2) MENA as a significant market for Chinese goods;
- 3) The slogan to “depoliticise” links in the framework of “Overseas Silk Way”;
- 4) The matter of fact Chinese competition with the USA, India, Russia and other countries outside the MENA.

V. The views from Arab states on the roles of the USA, Russian Federation and China in region.

VI. The views from Iran on the roles of the USA, Russian Federation and China in region.

VII. The role of the Gulf in the Syrian crisis

VIII. The role of Iran in the Syrian crisis

VIII. The Arab Gulf new partnerships amid American retrenchment

Workshop Director Profiles

Prof. Alexey Vasiliev is Honorary President of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) (since 2015), Member of RAS (elected in 2011), professor (since 1991), chair of Arab and African studies of the Russian University of Peoples' friendship (since 2015) in Moscow, editor-in-chief of Asia and Africa Today magazine (since 1998), in Moscow, member of the Council on foreign policy of the Foreign Ministry of the RF, member of the Scientific Council of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, member of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society. He was Special representative of the President of the Russian Federation for relations with leaders of African states (2006-2011). A.Vasiliev has made an important contribution to the studies of the USSR/Russia policy in the Middle East, as well as international relations in this region with due account of the “oil factor”, the “Arab Spring” and the “Arab winter”.

Prof. Vasiliev speaks Arabic fluently and has travelled extensively to the Middle East and North Africa regions. His recent publications include “Russian Policy in the Middle East: from Lenin to Putin” (in Russian – 2017, to appear shortly in English (Routledge), Arabic, Chinese); “History of Saudi Arabia” (in Russian, English, Arabic); “King Faisal of Saudi Arabia: Personality, Faith and Times” (in Russian, English and Arabic); “Egypt and the Egyptians” (in Russian and Arabic); “The Gulf in the Epicenter of the Storm” (Russian); “Africa and Challenges of the 21th Century” (Russian).

Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib is the Executive Director for Al Istishari Al Strategy Center for Economic and Future Studies, an independent Abu Dhabi based think tank. Her specialty is US-Arab relations with a special focus on lobbying. Dr. Khatib research also spans media biases, sectarianism, extremism and governance. Dr. Khatib worked as a marketing consultant and director, PR account manager and also in the banking industry.

She authored a book on the Arab lobby and the factors for success and for failure. Her book is published by Routledge UK. The Arabic version is published by the Center of Arab Unity for Studies in Beirut. She is a regular publisher on, namely, on the US relation with the Arab Gulf in several regional newspapers: Annahar Lebanon, Riyadh KSA-Al khaleej UAE-Al Ahram Egypt and Gulf News UAE- She is a weekly columnist in the Bahraini newspaper Al Watan. Dania is a regular on a series of Middle Eastern TV stations. Dr.Khatib has participated and spoken in numerous workshops and conferences. She was also a co-director in 2017 GRM. She is a member of the Arab Council of Social

Studies. Dania holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Exeter and both an MA and a BA in Business Administration from the American University in Beirut.

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