



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 1

# **A Peace Process for the Gulf: International Initiatives and Gulf Conflict Resolution**

### Workshop Directors:

**Prof Tim Niblock**

Professor Emeritus  
Exeter University  
United Kingdom  
Email: T.C.Niblock@exeter.ac.uk

**Prof Degang Sun**

Middle East Studies Institute  
Shanghai International Studies University  
China  
Email: sdgsdg@163.com

**Amb Talmiz Ahmad**

Former Indian Ambassador to Saudi  
Arabia, Oman and the UAE  
Ram Sathe Chair for International  
Studies  
Symbiosis International University  
India  
talmiz.ahmad@gmail.com

Adviser: Dr Abdullah Ba'abood

## **Abstract**

The Middle East is today in a state of unprecedented turbulence. The two principal Islamic giants of the region – Saudi Arabia and Iran – are locked intense competition. The ongoing struggle has strategic, doctrinal and political ramifications. While the divide between them primarily stems from strategic concerns, it is being shaped in

strident sectarian terms. This has split the region in a visceral manner, perhaps not seen in this intensity since the early days of Islam. The competition has been a major contributor to two wars in the region - in Syria and in Yemen. These have led to the deaths of over half-a-million people, the destruction of cities and societies, and serious humanitarian crises that threaten the lives of millions of people, without either side being able to claim full victory.

The conflicts Syria and Yemen, and the intense Saudi-Iranian rivalry, have drawn in other countries, each of which has been seeking to shape a new role for itself within the region. At the regional level, Turkey and Israel are deeply involved. At the global level, Russia and the US are now major players in the ongoing regional confrontations. The emerging rivalries portend further uncertainties in the regional scenario. The Trump presidency, for example, is deepening regional divisions by adopting a pro-active, even aggressive, posture against Iran, while some backing for Saudi Arabia. While other powers may not be so overtly divisive as this, their policies can also be problematic for the region.

With the intensifying vituperative rhetoric, and the vast expenditure on expanded military arsenals, an armed conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become a distinct possibility. The danger is enhanced by the fact that neither country has so far taken measures to re-set their relations on a basis of confidence-building and engagement. Nor have extra-regional powers taken any initiatives aimed at such an objective.

These inter-state rivalries and conflicts are occurring within a regional framework which tends to stoke instability rather than restore stable relations. Two major regional faultlines are impinging negatively on prospects for stability in the area. They are:

1. The assertion of Kurdish aspirations for independence, and the resistance to this. This threatens to overturn regional geopolitics, and
2. The fierce challenge to regimes mounted by trans-national forces (mainly the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State), and the resistance of established governments to this. Although both of the main Islamist groups have been subdued militarily, their ideology and their cadres remain undefeated. They are still capable of inflicting harm upon state order in West Asia and Africa, and upon soft targets in Europe and the US.

The impact of these faultlines is deepened by three critical characteristics of the regional system:

- a. **Regional institutions are no longer effective.** Both the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council are increasingly reflecting the fissures among regional players and have become largely inert and non-functional

- b. Domestic aspirations for reform are very strong, and are not being satisfied.** This dissatisfaction comes largely from the youth, who are seeking a fresh social contract so as to move away from the patriarchal and patronage-based polities currently in existence. Even when economic and social reforms are introduced, no significant changes in the political system are pursued.
- c. Economic stresses are impinging critically on large parts of the population.** This stems in part from the precipitate fall in oil prices, but also from the failure of governments to grapple with changes in the geology, technology, economics and geopolitics of global energy. Aggravating this are the ever-growing inequalities between rich and poor, and high levels of corruption which distort economic planning and outcomes.

With the active political and military involvement of Gulf states in competition/conflict across the Middle East, the security scenario in the Gulf is now seamlessly interlinked with developments in the wider region. It is clear, therefore, that the key to regional stability and peace in the Gulf (and perhaps the wider Middle East) is the **building of confidence** between the two principal Gulf states - Saudi Arabia and Iran - and the promotion of dialogue between them to address matters of mutual concern.

In the long term, the achievement of peaceful relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia needs to lead on to institutional pan-Gulf structures to handle the security of the area – a Gulf cooperative security arrangement. The latter will require the active involvement and engagement of all the Middle Eastern regional states and external powers and bodies with an interest in the region’s security.

The Gulf security scenario has **significant implications for the interests** - political, energy, economic and logistical - of most of the major global powers, and also of some middle-sized powers. Yet whereas the United States and some Western countries have been actively involved with Gulf security issues, others have not; despite having long-standing political and economic ties with the region they have remained “fence-sitters” on political/security issues. This is not surprising since, till recently, the US effectively acted as the hegemonic power in the region, giving little or no space to other potential role players.

Now, however, the situation is changing. On the one hand, the US is showing lessened enthusiasm for maintaining an all-encompassing security role in the region while, conversely, the level of trust which the US enjoys in the region has declined – both under President Obama and more so under President Trump. On the other hand, major European and Asian powers are becoming increasingly cognisant of the potential they have to pursue diplomatic/political/strategic roles in the Gulf, as also of the risks to their interests if insecurity spreads further. Most of these latter countries, moreover, are interested primarily in security outcomes achieved through

agreement and peaceful resolution of conflicts rather than through military imposition.

## Description and Rationale

- 1. Objectives and scope:** The workshop will offer a unique opportunity for Gulf scholars from different backgrounds to reflect on and discuss among themselves the pursuit of stability and peace in a deeply divided and contentious landscape.

The directors of the workshop have considerable experience of Gulf affairs. Three of the four directors of this workshop have together directed three GRM workshops in the past, which have ventured into new areas of Gulf studies such as ties with BRICS, the Indian Ocean, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, while the “adviser” has not only been a participant in many of these workshops but has also participated in some ongoing peace-related initiatives.

- 2. Suggested topics for papers:** While we would welcome submissions on all topics relevant to our overall theme, we will seek to ensure that we have a reasonable coverage in the following fields:

- a. Conflict resolution theory, and its application to Gulf competition/conflict*

- The relevance of theory?
- Comparative international experience: CSCE/OSCE; ASEAN etc
- Logistical connectivity and energy sharing as a means of promoting peace
- Cooperative security arrangements as a means and outcome of conflict resolution
- The relevance of Common Markets and economic integration
- Regional confidence-building and cooperative security

- b. Problems/issues capable of aggravating regional divisions in the Gulf region and which require resolution within any peace initiative*

- Security fears
- External interests
- Energy interests, especially as related to shared resources
- Minority groupings with cross-national links
- Radical Islamist movements
- Religious/sectarian differences

- c. Proposals and Frameworks for Gulf Peace Initiatives, Already on the Table*

- National: European initiatives; Asian initiatives; US initiatives
- Institutional (international organisations): the United Nations, the Islamic Cooperation Organisation, the Arab League
- Institutional (non-government bodies/groupings): peace groups, academic and non-official diplomatic groupings, religious bodies, interest groups etc.

*d. New Proposals for Gulf Peace Initiatives*

- Proposals which workshop participants wish to put forward, whether on their own behalf or on behalf of a wider grouping
- Proposals for particular countries or institutions/organisations to take initiatives
- Possibilities for Gulf countries to take initiatives in seeking cooperation in de-radicalisation, anti-terrorism and marine security, creating formal or informal institutions for this
- Possible cross-national initiatives (e.g. Russia/China/India)
- Feasibility of a “Marshall Plan” for regional peace and security in the Gulf.

*e. Tangential Issues Needing Clarification/Consideration/Resolution*

- Turkey’s role in Gulf and Middle East security
- Egypt’s role in Gulf and Middle East security
- Satisfying Kurdish aspirations in a regional security framework
- US-Iran confrontation and possible cooperation
- Possibilities of accommodating the Muslim Brotherhood in a regional peace paradigm
- Links with Israel/Palestine issues

## **Anticipated Participants**

The workshop is intended attract both senior Gulf scholars, younger researchers and hopefully some practitioners in the field of Gulf conflict resolution. We expect them all to bring to the discussion out-of-the-box ideas to address this challenging topic.

It is important that the workshop reflects as wide a range of opinions and perspectives as possible. Participation, therefore, will be encouraged from all the major institutional and governmental groupings which are intent on conflict resolution in the Gulf area, and all the main geographical areas whose interests are significantly affected by security issues in the Gulf.

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Prof. Tim Niblock** is Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter. He is also currently Visiting Professor at Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, and Joint Editor-in-Chief of the *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*. He has held the position of Vice-President of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies, and Vice-President of the British Society for Middle East Studies. He was the founding Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and previously served at the University of Khartoum, the University of Reading, and the University of Durham.

Among his published books are: *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes* (edited with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun, 2018); *Conflict Resolution and Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf Region* (edited with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun); *The Arab States of the Gulf and BRICS: New Strategic Partnerships in Politics and Economics* (edited with Degang Sun and Alejandra Galindo); *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Yang Guang, 2014); *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century. The Local to Global Transformation* (edited, with Monica Malik, 2013), *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (2007), *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (2006), 'Pariah States' and *Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya and Sudan* (2001), *Class and Power in Sudan* (1987), *Iraq: the Contemporary State* (edited, 1982), *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (edited, 1981), and *Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf* (edited, 1980).

**Prof. Degang Sun** is Professor and Deputy Director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, China. He was an academic visitor to the Middle East Centre, Oxford University, and Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2012-2013). He is currently a visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (September 2018-September 2019). His research interest is China and the Middle East. His most recent works are: *Quasi-alliance Diplomacy in Theory and Practice: An Empirical Studies of the Relations between Great Powers and the Middle East* (Beijing: World Affairs, 2012); "China's Response to the Revolts in the Arab World: A Case of Pragmatic Diplomacy," (*Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2014, with Professor Yahia Zoubir); and "China's Economic Diplomacy towards the Arab Countries: Challenges Ahead?" (*Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.24, No.95, 2015, with Prof. Yahia Zoubir).

**Amb. Talmiz Ahmad** Talmiz Ahmad joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974. Early in his career, he was posted in a number of West Asian countries such as Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen and later, between 1987-90, he was Consul General in Jeddah. He also held positions in the Indian missions in New York, London and Pretoria. He was head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000.

He served as Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia twice (2000-03; 2010-11); Oman (2003-04), and the UAE (2007-10). He was also Additional Secretary for International

Cooperation in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in 2004-06, and Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, in 2006-07. In July 2011, the Saudi Government conferred on him the King Abdul Aziz Medal First Class for his contribution to the promotion of Indo – Saudi relations.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he worked in the corporate sector in Dubai for four years. He is now a full-time academic and holds the Ram Sathe Chair in International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune.

He has published three books: *Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates* (2005), *Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms* (2010) and *The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions after the Arab Spring* (2013). Many of his papers have been published in academic journals and in books. He writes regularly in the Indian and West Asian media and lectures on political Islam, the politics of West Asia and the Indian Ocean, and energy security issues.

## **Selected readings**

It is hoped that contributors will take note of the series of Gerlach publications which have emerged from earlier Gulf Research Meetings on Gulf relations with the external world (especially those with Asian and African countries). The three convenors have contributed substantively to these works. The publications are:

Niblock, T (ed), with Monica Malik, *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Berlin and London: Gerlach (2012).

Niblock, T (ed), with Yang Guang, *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region*. Berlin: Gerlach (2013).

Gupta, R, Abubaker Bagader, Talmiz Ahmad, and N.Janardhan (eds), *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role*. Berlin: Gerlach (2014).

Hook, S, and Tim Niblock (eds), *The United States and the Gulf*. Berlin: Gerlach (2015).

Abusharaf, R.M., and Dale Eickelman (eds), *Africa and the Gulf Region: Blurred Boundaries and Shifting Ties*. Berlin: Gerlach, 2015.

Niblock, T, with Sun Degang and Alejandra Galindo (eds), *The Arab States of the Gulf and BRICS*. Berlin: Gerlach, 2016.

Niblock, T, with Talmiz Ahmad and Sun Degang (eds), *Conflict Resolution and Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2017.

Tim Niblock, with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (Eds.), *The Gulf States and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2018

Fawaz A Gerges, *The New middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014

Marc Lynch, “New Arab World Order”, Carnegie, 16 August 2018, at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/16/new-arab-world-order-pub-77056>

Kamran Mehrava, *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf*, Cornell University Press, 2018

Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Hegemony*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2018

Patrick Milton, Michael Axworthy and Brendan Simms, *Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2018

Bruno Macaes, *Belt and Road: the Sinews of Chinese Power*, London: Hurst, 2018