



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

### Workshop 3

## **The Gulf States in East Africa: Security, Economic and Strategic Partnerships?**

### Workshop Directors:

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### **Abstract**

Religious linkages, anti-piracy cooperation, and investments in vast swathes of fertile agricultural land have long been the primary bases for Gulf State engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. After the Arab Uprisings when Gulf petrodollars were channeled to front line states such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, there has been a relatively new and deepening strategic relationship between some Gulf States and their counterparts in Africa, especially in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, the Horn of Africa is rapidly emerging as a critical aspect in Gulf foreign policy making calculations and is facilitating a new broadening or internationalization of the Gulf security complex. Since the onset of the Yemen conflict, establishing exclusive spheres of influence, enhancing military cooperation, and diplomatic support have become an important part of Gulf security but has upset the existing balance of power in East Africa. Whether that's the Qatar – GCC crisis and the impact of Qatar withdrawing its peacekeeping forces from the Eritrea-Djibouti border, or Sudan suddenly ending decades of close economic, security and political cooperation with Iran in favour of Saudi Arabia, the dynamics at play could be consequential or even critical for all actors concerned.

## **Description and Rationale**

Across the Horn of Africa, where state borders have collapsed and domestic and regional politics have become intertwined, the region has become increasingly penetrated by actors from the Gulf, who seek to exert their own influence across an increasingly fragmented area. Although Gulf State - Horn of Africa relations have been dominated by the former, given the changes to strategic thinking following the Yemen conflict, the region is assuming a greater importance in Gulf capitals. Whilst the long term significance of these relationships may be less strategic than other regions and trends in the macro-environment, their impact on local conflicts and the regional balance of power is highly significant. Sudan was historically an important ally of Iran, especially in supplying arms to Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Sudan had allowed 3 Iranian ships to dock in 2012, but has formed renewed and revitalized relations with Saudi Arabia after Sudan expelled Iranian officials in 2014. Riyadh has influenced the U.S. to lift some economic sanctions against Omar al-Bashir in 2015 and has since invested in 1 million agricultural hectares. Sudan is now part of a security belt for the KSA.

Eritrea and Somalia have proved to be sympathetic with Iran which was useful for Iran to threaten international shipping in Bab al-Mandeb. Apart from presence in Eritrea and links to Al-Shabab, Iran is allegedly looking to establish more Hezbollah-type groups in West Africa as it has done in Lebanon, Iraq, and now Syria.

The Struggle for influence has been between Saudi Arabia/Egypt and Iran. Saudi Arabia has clear relationship with Ethiopia based on water, agriculture and livestock (complicated by Egypt - Ethiopia tensions over the Nile), but respective relations with Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti could change. Saudi engagement is primarily about Iran, but Egypt remains suspicious of Saudi motivations to develop a military presence in Djibouti for example. The emerging issue is not only about Iran, but about how the crisis with Qatar has created new instabilities in the Horn of Africa especially. With this in mind, when considering future trajectories, much depends on the resolution/escalation of the Yemen conflict.

The workshop is intended to contextualise the role of Gulf relations in East Africa and look ahead to developing relations in certain states in West Africa. Attention may also be paid to key GCC partners on the African continent more generally and what impact they may have through multilateral mechanisms to effect change. In doing so, we seek to understand the motivations behind engagement in the Horn of Africa, the means through which such influence is exerted, and the extent to which issues in both the Gulf and Horn impact upon one another.

## **Anticipated Participants**

The workshop is intended to attract a variety of papers from the Gulf, Africa and beyond on this under-researched topic. Papers based on fieldwork in the region are particularly

welcome. Papers will present the latest findings on Gulf security, foreign policy, trade and investment, and African foreign policy. These may answer the following questions:

- What are the main foreign policy priorities for the GCC states in Sub-Saharan and East Africa?
- What is Iranian policy in East Africa (compared to the GCC states) and how is it developing relations and policies in West Africa?
- What effect are domestic political calculations having on the foreign policies of each side?
- What are the main African states which fall under Saudi, UAE and Iranian influence specifically?
- To what extent is renewed, expanding or deepening Gulf engagement in Africa a spill over effect from the conflict in Yemen?
- What is the nature of current bilateral relations and are these expected to shift in the near future?
- Can African states gain greater relative autonomy through balancing given the intense rivalry between Saudi Arabia/UAE and Iran?
- Which African states are most susceptible to 'dollar diplomacy' or 'riyal politik'?
- How do we conceptualize Gulf engagement in Africa compared to the U.S., Europeans, China and India for example?
- What role for African states in Gulf interests such as food security, strategic investments and infrastructure projects?
- What are the other main people - people/socio-economic relations of Africa and the Gulf such as people-trafficking and smuggling?

Other papers which analyze Africa - Gulf relations within the context of broader Gulf policies aimed at Africa may also be included.

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Dr. Robert Mason** FHEA FRGS is an associate professor and Director of the Middle East Studies Center at The American University in Cairo. His research focus is on the international relations of the Middle East, with an emphasis on the Gulf states - particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran - U.S., Russian, U.K., the European Union, and Chinese foreign policy, Islam and the state, security and development studies - including Afghanistan - Egypt, Turkey, the UAE and sub-Saharan Africa.

Mason has been awarded fellowships with the Centre for International Studies at the LSE, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, and the Changing Character of War Programme at the University of Oxford. He has also been a visiting scholar at the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia at New York University, the Centre d'etudes de recherche internationales at Science Po in Paris, and was a

researcher with the Center for Future Security Strategies at the Hudson Institute in Washington D.C.

Robert Mason is the author or editor of five books: *Reassessing Order and Disorder in the Middle East: Regional Imbalance or Disintegration* (2017), *Egypt and the Gulf: A Renewed Regional Policy Alliance* (2017), *Muslim Minority - State Relations: Violence, Integration and Policy* (2016), *The International Politics of the Arab Spring: Popular Unrest and Foreign Policy* (2014), *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (2014). His articles have appeared in a range of publications, including: *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, *Harvard Journal of Middle East Politics and Policy*, *Third World Quarterly*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East* (ORIENT), *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, and *the Maghreb Review*. His op-eds have appeared in *OpenDemocracy*, *The National*, *Fair Observer*, *The Hill*, *Iran Review*, *Financial Times*, *The Diplomat*, *RUSI Newsbrief*, and the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. His research has been supported by AUC, British Institute of Persian Studies, HRH Prince Alwaleed Al Saud scholarship, and the LSE Middle East Centre.

Robert Mason has provided commentary to Radio France International, Voice of Russia, and has been interviewed by Girne University, Cyprus. He has delivered presentations for government and university audiences in the Middle East, the United States and Europe, and is an associate member of Chatham House. He holds a PhD in Middle East Politics from the University of Exeter, U.K.

**Dr. Simon Mabon** is lecturer in International Relations and Director of the Richardson Institute at the University of Lancaster. He is the author of *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (2013 and updated in 2015), co-author of *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government* (2015) *The Origins of ISIS* (2016) *British Foreign Policy After WWII* (2017) and co-editor of *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2015) and *People Sects and states: Interrogating Sectarianism in the Contemporary Middle East* (2017). He has published in a range of journals including *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Middle East Policy*, and *Religion, Politics and Ideology*.

Dr Mabon's research falls broadly within the discipline of International Relations but is applied empirically to the Middle East. He is currently exploring the nature of state-society relations across the Middle East and how the notion of sovereignty is challenged in the contemporary world.

Dr Mabon has spoken at the United Nations, European Parliament and was invited to speak at the universities of Harvard, Oxford, Georgetown Doha, Leeds, Bristol, Sheffield, An Najah (Palestine), Bogazici (Turkey) Salford, People's College Nanded (India), Yildirim Beyazit (Turkey), along with numerous public lectures. Dr Mabon has appeared on BBC Breakfast, BBC News, BBC News 24, BBC Radio 4 and 5, France 24, Al Jazeera News, Al Jazeera *Inside Story*, CNBC, ABC (Australia), Deutsche Welle, Euronews, Al Arabiya, i24, Ahul Bayht, and British Forces TV. He has also appeared in documentaries for Al Jazeera and Ahul Bayht. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Leeds.

## **Selected Readings**

Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

Robert Mason, *Foreign Policy in Saudi Arabia and Iran: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

Ginny Hill, "Across the Gulf: Piracy and People-Smuggling from the Horn of Africa", *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia*, (London: Hurst and Co, 2017), pp. 87-105.

Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Iran in the Horn of Africa: Outflanking U.S. Allies", *Middle East Policy*, XIX/2, Summer 2012.

See updated content from Chatham House Horn of Africa Research Group here: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/research/regions/africa/horn-of-africa> including: Sally Healy, *Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa: How Conflicts Connect and Peace Agreements Unravel*, Chatham House Horn of Africa Group Report, 2008

Tim Docking, *Terrorism in the Horn of Africa*, (Washington D.C., USIP, 2004).

Harry Verhoeven and Eckart Woertz, "Saudi Arabia and the Horn of Africa", in Neil Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

Chris Allen, "Understanding African Politics", *Review of African Political Economy*, 22/65, pp. 301-320.

Luke Patey, *The New Kings of Crude: China, India, and the Global Struggle for Oil in Sudan and South Sudan*, (London: Hurst, 2014).

Robert Mason, "Patterns and Consequences of Economic Engagement Across Sub-Saharan Africa: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese, British and Turkish Policies", LSE

Working Paper, 2015, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-relations/assets/documents/cis/working-papers/cis-working-paper-2015-01-mason.pdf>