



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 8

The Arab Gulf in the West: Perceptions and Realities; Opportunities and Perils

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Abstract

“How do *they* see *us*?” At the heart of international relations as well as intercultural communication, lies this question of Perception. How do you perceive the Other? How does the Other perceive you? What is the nature of the encounter when it happens? Recognizing, yet going beyond, a traditionally realist framework of Arab Gulf States foreign relations with western countries— conceptualized in the broader sense to be based on sheer pragmatic economic interests— the workshop tackles both the materialist and the symbolic in the efforts and initiatives launched by the Arab Gulf States to *create* themselves in the Western imagination. Such initiatives are both varied and visible. They range from setting up Arab and Middle East Centers at distinguished universities in the western capitals to winning bids for hosting sports events such as Qatar World Cup 2022. They include Saudi Arabia’s hiring of ten lobbying firms hoping to influence the US policies towards the Kingdom as well as the UAE’s building of stadiums pairing the name Emirates with Arsenal in Holloway, London while being crowned the world’s top humanitarian donor in 2013. While this workshop addresses the different efforts Arab

Gulf States have initiated in order to project a certain favorable image of themselves in the West, it will also be a forum to dissect successes and failures, across the country cases, that have engaged with such ambitious enterprise. Research shows that the *degree* of foreign countries' *public relations endeavors* in the US *directly impacts* how the American public perceives those countries. Moreover, the more visibly and favorably covered foreign countries are in the US media, the more positively the American public perceives those countries (Lee and Hong 2012). Does this apply in the case of the Arab Gulf States? How? Why? Or why not? The workshop invites papers that address Arab Gulf States' initiatives and/or that evaluate their effects, with both intended and unintended consequences. Emphasis is given to the dual-issue of image *projection* and image *perception*. Finally, it is argued that the image(s) and their perceptions are not monolithic and separate realms. But they rather constitute one another. The workshop invites papers that explore these questions employing a number of angles, theoretical frameworks, as well as research methods.

Description and Rationale

The workshop's objective is to discuss and analyze previous and current Arab Gulf States' outreach efforts *into* the West. Arab Gulf States' commercial activities, lobbying and politicking, cultural and sports sponsorships, as well as academic endowments have all witnessed a surge in the last decade or so. Dubai captures the world's imagination and stands as a beacon of globalized trade, scientific progressiveness, modern infrastructure and, increasingly, artistic and cultural experimentations—the latter is especially salient when it comes to other regions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) such as Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. Qatar, on the other hand, has exhibited a sequence of mixed connotations. It first projected itself at the forefront of news media, with Al Jazeera brand. Yet this eventually had its eclipse moment and does not stand as solidly credible as it used to be. Qatar ventured into international sports and won the bid to host World Cup 2022. But that was accompanied by allegations of bribery, corruption, and accusations of labor rights violations. In recent years, during and post the Arab uprisings, Qatar has been praised for its support of Arab youth. However, it became entangled in accusations of destabilizing the region and co-creating competing orders of violence. As for Saudi Arabia, it has been under the international spotlight for its shifting state-society relations, human rights record, military operations against Houthi militias in Yemen, its rivalry with Iran, plummeting oil prices, and the recent Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) that enables 9/11 families of victims to sue the Saudi government. In fact, the list is long. So much so that Saudi Arabia has hired up to ten lobbying firms in the United States just to help improve its image in the US media, and among American politicians and the public. Yet the challenge is that in a multi-vocal world of social media and citizen journalism, the traditional hegemony or mere impact of such lobbying firms— in

general— is being debated and questioned. This certainly applies to the Saudi Arabian case. Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain can also be comparative and contrasting cases to discover dynamic relations vis-à-vis the endeavors and the most visible current activities of the other three Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The nature of the topic is broad in scope, yet specific in focus, and therefore the theoretical frameworks of the accepted papers will be of an interdisciplinary nature. Papers should focus on or bridge and/or combine humanities and social sciences methods as they address the opportunities and perils facing the Arab Gulf States' engagement with the West. Theoretical frameworks can also go from the broad to the specific. Possible topics can be as general as the portrayal of Arab Gulf countries in the Western media with comparative case studies of two or more major western countries, for example the US, France, and Germany.

Yet some of the theoretical frameworks could be founded on the notion of the "encounter" with anthropological lenses and concepts of intercultural communication; for example, researching the significant increase in the number of educated Arab Gulf students in the West. How are their experiences shaped? How do they shape the perceptions of citizens in their host countries? And what happens when they return to their home countries? What happens if/when some of them stay and work and build a life in the West? Some papers could be focused on ethnographies depicting the lived experiences of Gulf citizens in the West, while other papers could have a social-scientific approach about the politics of Arab Gulf States in the West from an International Relations, global political economy, and/or comparative world politics lens.

Arab Gulf States have also funded think tanks as well as set up professorships and endowments in well-respected western universities for the study of Arab and Middle East history, politics, and culture. They have set up organizations such as the Arab Institute in Paris and, more recently, the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW). Also, the National Council on US-Arab Relations (NCUSAR) in Washington, D.C. could be another case study of how the Arab Gulf is presented in the US. So research that looks at and analyzes those initiatives and their effects, both intended and unintended, is needed to fill a gap in the current literature on the Arab Gulf States. Thus, it is important to examine the current imaginings of the Arab Gulf States in the West: How Arab Gulf States and their citizens are constructed, imagined, and perceived.

Contribution of the workshop

This is a timely topic as the rise of ISIS has negatively affected the image of some Arab Gulf States, namely Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the largest Arab Gulf state. The leaked emails revealing that Hillary Clinton believed back in 2014 that "Qatar and Saudi Arabia

fund ISIS” highlighting their “rivalry over dominating the Sunni Muslim World” place these countries in a negative light. The workshop will be able to generate ideas on how such perceptions came about and ways to improve realities on the ground that can directly feed into the perceptions of the Arab Gulf States in the West. Very little research has been done on the image of the Arab Gulf in Western countries. Even less research has systematically followed and analyzed the inventory of efforts the Arab Gulf States have committed in order to nurture public support inside these western countries, or delineated the outcomes of such efforts. There is a gap in the literature in the sense that research has thus far focused primarily on the relations of the Arab Gulf with Western countries from a realist interests-based international relations perspective. Other aspects that mix the materialist and the symbolic did not get enough attention. Thus, it is expected that deliberations in this workshop would pave the way for a new area of research in the field of Gulf Studies that extends beyond traditional international relations frameworks by weaving elements of intercultural communication into the mix. In addition to the value of such an academic research agenda, the workshop encourages an added policy oriented input. For example, by examining and evaluating Arab Gulf States’ attempts to engage Western countries, researchers are welcome to put forward recommendations on effective and efficient communication strategies and media narratives that place the emphasis on shared human values that ‘bridges a seeming cultural gulf’ between the Arab Gulf and the western world. Such recommendations can prove relevant to Arab Gulf States’ foreign policy makers.

Anticipated Participants

This workshop seeks submissions from scholars and researchers as well as strategic communication practitioners and policymaking experts. Submissions may take a theoretical or historical approach across the social sciences and the humanities as the focus is the question of the *image*. The presentation of empirical research, case studies, and or ‘hands-on’ qualitative research is also greatly encouraged

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

- Media: The image(s) of the Arab Gulf in Western media. How has western media contributed to shaping the general perception of the Arab Gulf? To what extent is the image(s) of the Arab Gulf and the different Arab Gulf countries related to the image of Islam? What forces synthesize the Arab and the Muslim into one image? And what aspects delineate them separately? What are the main drivers behind general perceptions of Arab Gulf countries? And how do individual Arab Gulf

artists/media professionals/public figures project their image? What strategies do they employ?

- Policy makers: What different initiatives have Arab Gulf States launched to engage the American public? What are the tools they use to influence western decision-makers to push for their state interests? What have been their consequences (including unintended consequences)?
- Arab communities abroad: How do the Arab Gulf states initiate/maintain relations with Arab and Muslim communities in the West? How has charity work been perceived? UAE ranked as the top humanitarian donor in the world in 2013, while Saudi Arabia's charity networks have been accused of financing terrorism since 9/11. What forces drive the difference in the two cases and differences in the perceptions of the two cases? This can include relations with Arab communities in the US as well as in different European countries.
- Military relations: In the context of an increasingly militarized region in the Middle East in general and the Arab Gulf States becoming engaged in more wars, besides the increasing proxy wars, military campaigns, and military operations, what emerging relations can be detected between the Arab Gulf countries and NATO? To what extent are the Arab Gulf countries perceived as reliable partners?
- International organizations: Analysis of how Arab Gulf states are being portrayed in different European Union reports. What governs the collaboration and the outreach of Arab Gulf states to the European Union as an organization?
- Arab Gulf States and individual outreach initiatives: What initiatives are put in place to influence the flow of ideas *into* the West, either at the state level or the societal level of individual Arab Gulf citizens working in the arts, the media, business, sports, or other professions? At the institutional level: case studies could include the Arab Institute in Paris; the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, the National Council on US-Arab Relations (NCUSAR) in Washington, D.C. are examples of collaborations with think tanks as well as Arab Gulf support of academic research centers in the US. At the individual level, studies could focus on: Artists' and other public figures, professionals, philanthropists, and intellectuals who work on personal or collective initiatives to engage with western cultures and societies.

Workshop Director Profiles

Marwa Maziad is an International Relations and Middle East Media and Politics Expert. She is a weekly columnist for *Almasry Alyoum*, Egypt's leading daily independent newspaper, as well as Al Jazeera English. She received training in news presentation and talk show presentation at Al Jazeera Training Center and has been repeatedly invited as guest anchor for a number of talk shows in Egypt.

Maziad has 15 years' experience teaching and lecturing internationally in higher education institutions in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, on topics pertaining to international relations and intercultural political communication. She is also a conflict resolution practitioner at the Conflict Resolution Intervention Services (CRIS), employing the Marwa Maziad MMMethod© to "confront and deflate" conflicts.

She has appeared for cultural and political analysis on CNN International, Al Jazeera English, BBC World Service, National Public Radio (NPR) and a number of other Arab and international media.

She has held academic positions as Faculty Member of Qatar University's Department of Social Sciences as well as Northwestern University in Qatar's Journalism Program. This experience in Qatar led to setting a research agenda in Gulf Studies, which shaped up through her consultancy on a number of peer-reviewed international academic research grants. This also led to her participation in several Gulf Studies conferences at the University of Exeter and at the Gulf Research Meetings at University of Cambridge (2014-2016). A series of academic articles and/or book chapters ensued from these forums, including "Qatar: Cultivating 'The Citizen' of the Futuristic State" which was a chapter in an edited volume entitled "Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives and Identity in the Arab Gulf States" (Routledge 2016). One of her two forthcoming academic articles is on Egypt-GCC relations entitled "Qatar in Egypt: The Politics of Al Jazeera." The other is on Qatar's national security policies within a dynamic regional order entitled "Mercenaries-on-Demand: Jihadists as Means of Military Diversification in Qatar's Foreign Policy."

Maziad received her Masters in International Communication from the University of Washington and has been a Fellow at the Middle East Center of Jackson School of International Studies. Her MA thesis entitled "Youssef Chahine's Cinema: The Hospitable Space between 'Self' and 'Other,'" traced depictions of East-West relations in the work of internationally renowned Egyptian Filmmaker Youssef Chahine (1926-2008). She succeeded in securing interviews with the prominent director around two critical historical moments: September 11, 2001 and the US War on Iraq in 2003.

Her PhD work on comparative politics of the Middle East, with a focus on “oscillating civil-military relations in Turkey, Egypt and Israel 1980-2015” was done at the University of Washington. She was a selected Fellow at Columbia University’s Summer Workshop on Analysis of Military Operations and Strategy (SWAMOS), 2015. Her paper was selected for the European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS), 2015. She was also an invited Fellow to chair a panel at the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society (IUSAFS) in Chicago, 2015. She presented her comparative research in Rio de Janeiro (2016), at the International Conference on Transformations in the Military Profession as part of the International Sociological Association’s (ISA) Research Committee (RC01) on Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution.

Maziad is also a photojournalist by training and has produced two documentary films. *Conversation 1: American Perceptions of the War on Iraq* (2003) has been internationally screened in the United States and Europe. *USA-SA: A Dialogue between American and South African Women* (2004) addressed common challenges and opportunities facing women in both countries and beyond.

She is fluent in Arabic, English, French, Turkish, and Hebrew and has also studied Spanish, Italian, and German.

Dania Koleilat Khatib currently holds the position of advisor at the Abu Dhabi-based think tank *Al Istishari* for strategic consultancies on economic and future studies. She has ten years of work experience in strategic communication at the agencies’ level as well as the client level.

She earned her PhD in Politics from the University of Exeter in 2014. Her thesis examined Arab Gulf lobbying attempts within the US. The thesis was entitled: “Aspects of Arab Lobbying: Factors for Winning and Factors for Losing”. In the fall of 2000, Dania obtained an MBA from the American University of Beirut. The thesis was entitled, “Truthfulness in Advertising.” She also received her bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from the American University of Beirut in 1997. Among Dania’s recent publications is a book stemming from her dissertation work: *The Arab Lobby: Factors for Success and Factors for Failure* (Routledge 2015). The book has been translated into Arabic by the Center for Arab Unity for Studies Lebanon (2015).

Dania’s media appearances include TV commentaries as well as articles on various political topics pertaining to Arab Gulf-US relations. Her analyses have appeared in various regional newspapers, including *Annahar*—Lebanon and Riyadh (Saudi Arabia); *Al Khaleej* and *Gulf News*—UAE; *Al Ahram*—Egypt; and *Contemporary Arab Affairs*,

Araa—Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi. She is a weekly columnist in the Bahraini newspaper *Al Watan*.

Dania is fluent in English, Arabic, and French.

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