


Middle East Directions Annual Conference - Hybrid Format

Where do we start? Designing Steps Towards a Regional Security System in the Persian Gulf

 @medirections

20-21 May 2021

Sala del Consiglio and Webinar Zoom - Villa Salviati, Via Bolognese 156 - Florence

Scientific Organisers:

Luigi Narbone | European University Institute

Abdolrasool Divsallar | European University Institute

Introduction

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Iran are experiencing significant socio-political shifts while continuing rivalries and mistrust feed region-wide perceptions of insecurity. Systemic dysfunctions in the Gulf security order have so far prevented the emergence of any sustainable and inclusive peace and cooperation framework. US-Iran tensions, Saudi-Iranian rivalry, intra-GCC mistrust and the emerging Arab-Israeli alliance opposing Turkish-Iranian interests are only examples of fault lines there. These dynamics have already generated broader conflicts in the MENA region. If left unchecked there is the risk of wide-reaching and international security repercussions.

The 2021 Middle East Directions (MEDirections) Annual Conference will provide an opportunity to discuss these issues and the findings of the MEDirections e-book *Stepping Away from the Abyss: A Gradual Approach Towards a New Security System in the Persian Gulf* (May 2021). It will be the first major event organised in the framework of the new MEDirections Regional Security Initiative.

Objectives

The conference will bring together scholars, researchers, practitioners, policymakers and a distinguished group of international experts who contributed to the e-book. They will, together, discuss options for a cooperative security system in the Gulf region. The conference will provide a platform for the critical analysis of theoretical frameworks and practical options through a multi-disciplinary approach.

Modalities

The conference is organised into three public panels and one closed-door high-level policy dialogue. Each panel features one guest speaker and several panelists. The panels will start with a guest speaker (15 minutes) followed by **five-to-seven minute** initial introductions by panelists. We kindly ask panelists to respect the timeframe and to bring three to four critical points to **kick off** the conversation. Discussion with other invited participants and the audience will follow. The chairs will manage the time strictly.

Programme

20 May

13:30 - 14:00 **Institutional Welcome**

Brigid Laffan | Director, Robert Schuman Centre, EUI

Luigi Narbone | Director, Middle East Directions Programme, EUI

Abdolrasool Divsallar | Co-Lead, Regional Security Initiative, EUI

14:00 - 16:00 **Panel 1: Non-Traditional Security Cooperation**

In restructuring the Gulf security system, economic relations, environmental challenges, human security issues and cyber security might provide openings for collaboration. When disengagement among rivals is the dominant trend, common interests have the potential to become a vector for regional cooperation. In which ways could environmental and climate change challenges, water scarcity and food security issues, health emergencies, cyber security and organisational crime incentivise cooperative behaviour among stakeholders and counter zero-sum-game policies?

Chair:

Luigi Narbone | Director, Middle East Directions Programme, EUI

Guest Speaker:

Abdulaziz Sager | Chairman of Gulf Research Center

Speakers:

Robert Mogielnicki | Resident Scholar, Arab Gulf States in Washington

Silvia Colombo | Senior Fellow, Italian Institute of International Affairs

Tobias Zumbragel | Senior Researcher, CARPO

Vira Ameli | Researcher, Oxford University

Cyril Widdershoven | Programme Associate, Middle East Directions Programme

16:20 - 18:20 **Panel 2: Which approach to Restructure Regional Security**

Past experiences of promoting engagement and building a peaceful regional security system have had, at best, limited results. What can past experiences and comparative studies tell us about the best approach to restructuring a security system in the Gulf? Is the conflict-ridden nature of the current status quo caused by systemic failures or by spoilers? What factors should be deemed essential in a future security system? What should be done to construct a persuasive rationale for dialogue in the Persian Gulf region?

Chair:

Abdolrasool Divsallar | Co-Lead, Regional Security Initiative, EUI

Guest Speaker:

Robert Springborg | Senior Advisor Italian Institute of International Affairs

Speakers:

Gawdat Bahgat | Professor, US National Defense University

Caroline Rose | Human Security Head, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Liu Lanyua | Associate Professor, Tsinghua University

David Roberts | Associate Professor, Kings College London

Mahsa Rouhi | Research Fellow, US National Defense University

21 May

09:30 - 11:00

Panel 3: Cultural Diplomacy and Religious De-securitization

Religious rivalries and sectarian divides have transformed the region in recent decades. But Islam and its traditions have remained among the strongest ideational commonalities among competing nations. Even beyond religion, the cultural dimension could create bridges between Gulf states. In what ways could Islamic traditions, such as the Hajj become vehicles of diplomacy and affect the political deadlock? Under the dynamics of politicised Islam, how can cultural connections be broadened to enable a bottom-up de-escalation process?

Chair:

Clément Therme | Programme Associate, Middle East Directions Programme

Guest Speaker:

Olivier Roy | Professor, EUI

Speakers:

Riccardo Redaelli | Director, Center for Research on the Southern System and the Wider Mediterranean (CRiSSMA)

Ghadir Nasri | Director, Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies

Mahjoob Zweiri | Director, Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University

Simon Mabon | Director, SEPAD Project at Lancaster University

Rouzbeh Parsi | Head of MENA Programme, Swedish Institute of International Affairs

11:15 - 13:15 **Policy Roundtable (Closed door meeting by invitation only)**

The speed and dangers of escalatory trends in the Gulf region require an internationally agreed upon course of action. What immediate, medium- and long-term actions could be adopted to foster de-escalation while addressing the security concerns of regional parties? What challenges need to be confronted and how can obstacles be overcome?

Chairs:

Luigi Narbone | Director, Middle East Directions Programme, EUI

Abdolrasool Divsallar | Co-Lead, Regional Security Initiative, EUI

Speakers:

Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour | Deputy Minister, President of Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), MFA Iran

Lucio Demichele | Head, Policy Planning Unit, MFA Italy

Joost Hiltermann | Director of Middle East & North Africa Program, ICG

Thierry Caboche | Middle East Head of Division, French MFA

Ebtesam Al Ketbi | Director, Emirates Policy Center

Andrey Kortunov | Director, Russian International Affairs Council

Ross Harrison | Director of Research at Middle East Institute

