

## Mapping the Middle East in 2021

**The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington**

**University of Haifa**

**National Security Studies Center**

September 29, 2021 | 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

**Presenters:**

- **F. Gregory Gause, III**, Professor and head of the international affairs department, the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University
- **Benjamin Miller**, Full Professor of International Relations, the University of Haifa
- **Ambassador Douglas Silliman**, President, AGSIW

**Participants:**

- Ariel Kabiri
- Aziz Al-Ghashian
- Bernard Haykel
- Chen Kertcher
- Gallia Lindenstrauss
- Geneive Abdo
- Hussein Ibish
- Li-Chen Sim
- Mary Casey-Baker
- Michael Epper
- Mohammed Bahroon
- Moran Zaga
- Rakefet Diamond
- Raphael Ben Levi
- Raymond Karam
- Robert Maoginsky
- William Roebuck
- Yoram Evron
- Ehud Eiran
- Carmela Lutmar
- Jonathan Fulton

## Summary

### Executive Summary

This workshop took place on September 29, 2021 synchronously online. It was the first in a series of eight workshops organized by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, University of Haifa, and the National Security Studies Center aimed at mapping the changing networks, axes, and influences in a post-Arab Spring Middle East and analyzing the motives and influences of the powers involved. This first workshop served to introduce the project to participants, as well as address questions on the perceived US withdrawal from the Arabian Peninsula and broader Middle East region. With the region clearly experiencing a multipolar moment, this workshop sought to understand how this reality is affecting partnerships and alliances in the region, how regional and local actors are positioning themselves, whether we will witness increased Gulf Arab security cooperation following the Al Ula summit, and whether the Abraham Accords have reshaped regional alliances in the face of regional threats.

### Workshop Introduction

Ambassador Douglas Silliman, AGSIW

Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington President Ambassador Douglas Silliman welcomed all the participants to the first in a series of workshops organized by AGSIW with University of Haifa and the National Security Studies Center, a project that originated in 2020 after the signing of the Abraham Accords. AGSIW was seeking partners to open a discussion with about developments in diplomatic relations in the Arab Gulf, and the NSSC then proposed a series of workshops to examine the origins of attitudes towards and the potential of the Abraham Accords. A major goal of this project is to provide a forum where Arab and Israeli voices can discuss the future of the Abraham Accords and the different aspirations and expectations that all parties have for this new agreement. Noting the hopes of Israel to improve relations with its Arab neighbors, as well as Arab hopes to address the plight of Palestinians, Ambassador Silliman said that these different aspirations are not necessarily contradictory and can even be complementary and strengthen the Abraham Accords. He continued by introducing some of the issues this program will address over the next year, such as competition between global powers, including Russia and China, the social and economic opportunities of the accords, and how we set the framework for understanding how the accords came into being and to what extent they might succeed or fail. Introducing the speakers for this workshop, Ambassador Silliman gave the floor to Dr. Benjamin Miller from University of Haifa to begin the discussion.

## Conceptual Mapping: The Middle East in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Realpolitik, Liberalism, or Nationalism?

Dr. Benjamin Miller, University of Haifa

Dr. Benjamin Miller began his presentation by outlining his key question about which of the three competing frameworks listed in the title best explains the Middle East's current situation. His presentation was comprised of four sections: the realpolitik section - which was divided into two parts dealing respectively with the global hegemony and the regional actors – the section on liberalism, and the question of nationalism and identity's effects on peace and conflict in the region.

- *West to East Shift.* Dr. Miller raised the question of whether the global hegemony in the region are shifting from western powers, like the United States and Europe, to eastern powers like Russia and China. Specifically, he pointed to American energy independence and disenchantment with post-9/11 military actions as factors that slowed down the *Pax Americana* project in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Russia succeeded in saving its ally in Syria, continues to intervene in Libyan national politics, and may yet emerge as a broker between Israel and Iran. Finally, Dr. Miller said that China, previously seen as a rising investment and economic power, has been pushed towards strategic engagement in the Middle East due to a competition of power perceived by the US. A potential alignment of China with Iran may create a change of balance against the US, Arab, and Israeli allies.
- *Arab to Non-Arab Shift.* Dr. Miller offered another possible vector for understanding balance of power in the Middle East, saying that the region has undergone a change in leadership since the post-colonial era. Iran, Turkey, and Israel are becoming the new big power brokers and while an “alliance of the periphery” with Iran and Turkey was the original strategic push for Israel, there is now a tacit Arab-Israeli alliance emerging.
- *Realpolitik in the Middle East.* The main issue in the region is power-balancing, and in standard realpolitik fashion, it has made for “strange bedfellow” alliances based on material strengths rather than shared identity – even sometimes cutting against it. Dr. Miller offered the shared goals of Iran and Shia militias against Arab states like Iraq, or the (less successful) allyship of Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar versus authoritarian Arab states and Israel.
- *Nuclearization and Realpolitik.* He also raised the question of whether Iran will become nuclear and what that means for power balancing in the Middle East. In this scenario, there are two possible roads: one in which mutually assured destruction (MAD) theory and deterrence prevail and one in which Iran's nuclearization leads to proliferation by other regional actors, leading to political destabilization.

- *Liberalism.* Dr. Miller was generally positive on the role of liberalism going forward for the Middle East, but stressed that the Middle East was still struggling to meet international expectations for liberal policymaking. He noted that, despite its broad failure, the Arab Spring showed an aspiration to move away from stagnant authoritarianism in the Arab World, and that Iraq and Lebanon were two bright spots for mass protest as a show of civic nationalism. Liberal explanations for the Abraham Accords stress the trade and technology possibilities for Arab Gulf states and that the door is open for cooperation on common threats like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Dr. Miller also said that the Middle East region broadly suffers from a lack of any strong liberal international institutions at this time, sporting only the ineffectual Arab League, and the highly limited GCC.
- *Nationalism and Identity.* Dr. Miller explained that the failure of foreign intervention, especially for regime change by the United States, can be explained largely by nationalist resistance to such projects. American promotion of democracy failed partly because of the problem of failed states in the region, which relies on two factors. First, “low state capacity” as defined by a national government’s inability to project itself and its projects across the country, and secondly, the lack of congruence between identities and borders. He offered Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Syria as examples of the latter phenomenon.
- *Sectarian Identity.* Dr. Miller identified sectarian identities as a key explanation for the identity conflict issue, citing Iranian-backed penetration of Shia groups which foment these divisions abroad. He said that civil wars based on identities in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen show tribal and territory-based conflicts as well. The suppression of Kurds by Turkey in Syria also fit into this pattern.

Dr. Miller closed his presentation by raising questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and suggested that the Abraham Accords might represent a new chapter in relations between the Arab States and Palestinians as relations open further with Israel.

## Dr. F. Gregory Gause, III

John H. Lindsey '44 chair, professor of international affairs, and head of the international affairs department

The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University

Dr. Gause began his presentation by addressing the primary topic of American disengagement in the Middle East region, which he argued is sometimes exaggerated. On this topic, he defined what the United States is and is not willing to do in the region moving forward. The last three American presidents (Biden, Trump, and Obama) have all campaigned on lowering the number of American boots on the ground in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and while they talked a big game, President Obama intervened in Libya, and President Trump paradoxically called for less intervention while trying to apply full pressure to Iran – mutually incompatible policy positions.

In a longer scope of history, Dr. Gause argued that there may be less American soldiers in the Middle East than there were in 2007, but the United States is overwhelmingly more involved in the region than it was pre-9/11.

- *What the US Will Do.* Dr. Gause said that the US has proven its willingness to prevent the conquest of one state by another through military means. The US will protect the borders of friendly states, as proven in Kuwait in 1992.
- *What the US Will Not Do.* He also pointed out that the United States will not use its own forces to prop up a government of allies against popular uprisings by their own people. If Hosni Mubarak did not receive that kind of help, then it is unlikely any other US ally in the region will.
- *What the US Might Do.* Dr. Gause explained that a vast grey area lies between these two polar ends of American foreign policy behaviors.
- *Lebanonization and American Democracy-building.* Dr. Gause argued that Lebanon, a state designed to be centrally weak, was a vacuum into which regional and international actors intervened. This process was replicated, he said, after the 2003 invasion of Iraq in which the United States intentionally dismantled the Iraqi state to build it up from scratch, gutting all three main pillars of the modern authoritarian state. In this way, political vacuums have turned players into playing fields for the major powers.
- *American Weaknesses and Iranian Strengths.* With the possibility of conquest off the table, actors like Iran have a big advantage because they have loyal clients and allies happy to spread Iran's influence and to be a junior partner in the project. Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood failed to replicate this model, as did the Saudis and Salafist groups domestically and abroad. The problem for states like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the US is that they are not talented at working with non-state actors, who can operate domestically and avoid international repercussions.

Dr. Gause closed his presentation with this discussion of power-balances in the Middle East, and suggested that the future is going to be a decentralized Middle East where borders are not going to change, but client states and insurgent groups may find more success within their own borders.

## Discussion and Q&A

The discussion carried on from the end of Dr. Gause's presentation on the topic of non-state actors and the definition of failed states in the region. Hussein Ibish argued for a distinction between decentralized states that are functional versus a failed state where armed non-state actors control territory within a single state. An important point that the discussion came back to several times was made here, with Dr. Ibish pointing out the contradictory nature of Iranian foreign policy in which Iran projects power through sectarian proxies that go into failed states or fail those states in a parasitical way, while at the same time

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calling for a regional security framework based on a team of functional states. Further, Dr. Ibish stated that it is necessary for other regional actors to call Iran's bluff, because two such policies are contradictory and mutually exclusive.

Dr. Bernard Haykel followed up on this topic. Dr. Haykel added that non-state actors in the region are mostly surviving with the backing of state actors and that it is difficult to deal diplomatically with states that support militias operating in other countries, like Iran. He proposed a containment-style solution (which the US has been pursuing in recent years) against individuals in these non-state organizations, to punish or retaliate and let these actors know where the limits are.

Mr. Aziz Alghashian opened up discussion for another topic that ran throughout this section: how we conceptualize the framework of Arab-Israeli "alliances" and whether there is a better approach to understanding the way states like Israel and Saudi Arabia interact, even without formal agreements in place. Dr. Chen Kertcher added that some of these Arab states are undervaluing liberal international institutionalism to achieve their aspirations.

The discussion turned to a major point from Dr. Miller's presentation concerning structure. Dr. Ehud Eiran added that the injection of China as a great power is significant and that competition with the US (even if is only perceived on the American side) changes how actors behave. The topic of mapping, therefore, is incredibly important to this discussion. For example, Dr. Eiran points to Israel as a country emerging from decades of being an island in the region to possible regaining the role it had in the British Mandate period as a port of oil exports.

Further on the topic of mapping the Middle East against global hegemon competitions, Michael Eppel made several points: first, the theatres of conflict/competition overlap one another and create a patchwork effect on American and Chinese efforts to win allies in the region. However, one of the weaknesses of Russia and China is any lack of naval power, which hinders efforts in the Indian Ocean and Gulf regions.

The discussion turned to the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how the Abraham Accords would impact Palestinians domestically and internationally. A consensus seemed to emerge that, in general, Palestinians will be in a difficult position because – as pointed out by Dr. Ibish – the Palestinian authority in Ramallah had been using the API as a placeholder for a national policy under their own (individualistic) interpretation, and would now be left without a national strategy going forward. Contextualizing the Palestinian issue in his framework, Dr. Miller responded that the US has generally not been in the business of intervening against non-state actors and that nationalist conflicts, if left ignored, will create larger conflagrations in the future.

Continuing on this topic, the discussion turned to Palestine in the framework of failed or incomplete states in the Middle East. Now, arguably, Palestinians find themselves at the center of a multipolarity issue, in which their weak state may act as a gateway for foreign intervention in a world with multiple global hegemons.

This led to the final point of discussion about the Chinese and Russian perspectives on engagement in the Middle East. The discussion returned to the topic of declining influence of traditional Arab centers of power and the growing influence of Israel and Turkey on their neighbors. Dr. Jonathan Fulton also followed up on an earlier point that China lacks a blue water navy capable of extending strong influence

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into regions like the Gulf and Red Sea regions and that China's main tactic is to undermine confidence in the US as a reliable ally.

## Closing Discussion

The discussion ended with Ambassador Silliman's comments on the common themes that will be important to Middle East policy in the future, such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, food and healthcare security, and access to water across the region. Some of the issues he raised that may be answered in further workshops include American balance of diplomacy and military force, and the future of Palestinian leadership.

Dr. Kertcher suggested looking for more positive connections in regard to liberalism as the Arab states continue to transform, noting that regional actors are shifting their policies, even if institutional ties are weak right now. Dr. Miller emphasized the failed state framework as an important consideration going forward and suggested that a lack of shared national identity is going to continue to be a problem.

Ambassador Silliman provided brief closing remarks and the first workshop in this series concluded.