

“REGIONAL RECALIBRATION: WHERE DO GULF STATES STAND?”



KEY POINTS FROM A ‘GULF INTERNATIONAL FORUM’ WEBINAR



13 JANUARY 2022

OVERVIEW

Unlike the year 2020, 2021 saw the many efforts at de-escalation, dialogue and normalization in the Middle East, in general, and in the Persian Gulf region in particular. While these efforts did not resolve any conflicts, they opened channels of dialogue between nearly all regional and international rivals.

For its part, Iraq hosted several rounds of talks between Riyadh and Tehran, aimed at lowering tensions and perhaps resolving some issues between the two principal rivals in the Persian Gulf. Turkey also reached out to the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia after several years of hostility working on economic deals as a driver for de-escalation.

Within the GCC, UAE seems to have taken the lead in seeking full normalization with Assad’s Syria. Perhaps most importantly, 2021 saw the end of the GCC rift and resumption of full relations by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi with Doha. Finally, both the US and Iran have persevered through 8 difficult rounds of trying to revive the multilateral JCPOA deal to restrain Iran’s nuclear program.

Given that none of these efforts have so far reached fruition, a webinar composed of three regional experts and hosted by GIF (moderated by Ambassador Patrick Theros) looked at the challenges that lie ahead for all these issues in 2022.

KEY POINTS IN SPEAKERS’ PROGNOSIS FOR 2022

1. **Dr. Lina Khatib** (*Director of Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House*)
 - Focusing on the lay of the land, it appears that the Middle East is not a priority for the US as it concentrated on ways of dealing with China

and Russia. As a result, for reasons of survival and especially lack of interest on the part of the US, the Gulf States have embarked on various engagements with their foes - e.g., KSA with Iran, KSA with Qatar, Egypt with Qatar and others etc.

- For its part, the US is keeping tabs on these engagements without really trying to guide them in any particular direction. However, this situation may change in the event that something unexpected should happen (like the Arab Spring) which would then make US interjection unavoidable.
- UAE has been especially pragmatic in this regard for the pursuit of its national interest by initiating talks with its adversaries (such as Iran and Turkey) as well as with its allies (e.g., Abraham Accords) - something that could have made much more gains had the US been more proactively involved.
- Looking at Lebanon which has been marginalized, it was clear that the US had adopted a different approach, by seeing the country more as part of the wider "Iranian role in the Levant file".
- Part of the UAE's incentive for engagement with adversaries has been to focus on Gulf security. This has meant less involvement with places like Lebanon. It followed therefore that none of the Gulf states were willing to go out of their way for helping Lebanon during these crucial days.
- Ultimately, the path that the US takes will hugely affect the conduct of affairs by all the Gulf states - i.e., where the US goes others are likely to follow.
- In Syria, while the UAE has led the way in trying to normalize relation with the Assad regime, nonetheless, the red lines for normalization was still being set by the US.
- The talks in Baghdad between Iran and Saudi Arabia have not been productive but are reflective of the kind of emerging pragmatism that is evolving for many reasons, first and foremost because of greater US disinterest in regional matters.
- While economics has a role in regional ties, it is not a key factor for guarding relationships.

2. **Dr. Ali Bakir** (*Research Assistant Professor at the Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Qatar University*)

- Prior to focussing on Turkey, it was established that 2021 had been the year of reconnection between Iran-Saudi Arabia, Qatar- Saudi Arabi and Egypt-Qatar etc.
- In the last several years, Turkey has relied mostly on its hard power to score points in places like Syria, Libya and the Caucasus. But now Turkey is trying to shift its concerns towards balancing its interests and focusing on issues that pertain more to domestic economic concerns, especially in the aftermath of the dramatic fall in the value of its national currency.
- The process of normalization with the UAE has gone generally well with MBZ having visited Ankara and President Erdogan expected to make an official visit to Abu Dhabi. As a result, the situation in North Africa (Libya) has become much more stable while they wait for the outcome of the upcoming presidential election in that country.
- There have been attempts such as a telephone conversation between Erdogan and King Salman, aimed at trying to revive Turkish relations with Saudi Arabia and taking them to a different level following the Khashoggi incident. As a result of this, there has also been a much more 'relaxed' situation with all the other Gulf states as well.
- Turkish relations with Iran was also another sensitive issue in 2021. While Turkey has never been against Iran's peaceful use of nuclear energy, it is very concerned about an outcome in the current JCPOA talks that may possibly open Iran's hand to become more financially proactive in the region (i.e., as a result of more money with less sanctions).
- The outcome of pending presidential election in Turkey (and the US in 2024) will most likely play a great role in shaping the future of Turkish politics, it is quite possible that the current stable situations that has prevailed in the region may not remain the same, especially in the event of mounting tensions in places like Syria, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean.
- For Turkey, promotion of economic ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states is a key consideration. It is also seen as a safe way for moving forward in all bi-lateral ties.

3. **Alex Vatanka** (*Director of Iran Program and Senior Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative, Middle East Institute*)

- Focusing on Iran, after some 6 months into the new Raisi administration, it is clear that the new government is closely following the agenda that is set by Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC.
- Raisi who has been linked with key hardliners within the system since he was 20 year of age, having spent much of his time with the Judiciary, is, himself, not considered to be in sync with various important issues of concerning domestic or foreign policy.
- It thus follows that his accession to the presidency was never meant to change anything and as such it would a mistake looking at him for any direction in policies that are essentially shaped by 'Khamenei's office' and the top brass in the IRGC.
- In such circumstances, it is also most prudent to discard looking at the role of 'moderate reformists' in any new development in Iran. Unlike the period from 2013-2021, when there was some pushback from the likes of Rouhani and Zarif, there is no longer any challenge to the agenda that is being set by the hardliners.
- In this situation, all that the hardliners who brought Raisi to power want is a limited agreement in Vienna that will not encompass broader issues such as regional matters or missile policies, which Khamenei and the IRGC are so averse in wanting to discuss.
- The Iranian Supreme Leader aged 82, is keen to secure the future of his legacy by ensuring a succession to his leadership that would allow for that to happen. In such a scenario, it is unlikely to try and build on anything like the JCPOA because of the regime's "survival strategy".
- While Iran is likely to try and court Russian and Chinese support for its various policies, especially in countering US and Western pressures, it is unlikely that the support they ultimately secure from those quarters will be of any significance.
- In the region, while it is unlikely that the IRI will try and expand its presence (unless another Yemen like opportunistic scenario should evolve), the regime remains very keen to retain the kind of presence and influence which they already have in places like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.
- It is important in all calculations pertaining to Iran that the role attributed to Shia Islam as driver of foreign policy should not be exaggerated. What should be looked at closely is the competition

between 'ideological vs practical Iran', given that in the past 30 years, Khamenei has always opted for the option of an 'ideological Iran'.

- For Iran economic issues are key, especially since due to sanctions, they have had to rely much more on trade with their neighbours in the region. Indeed, despite Iran-UAE rivalry on many issues, the high level of trade between them has remained generally unaffected.

