

The 14th Annual Conference of the Ezri Center for Iran and Gulf States Research

Iran and the Gulf States in the Shadow of Recent Events

Monday | May 30, 2022 | 16:00–20:30



Prof. Shaul Chorev, Head of the Ezri Center

Dr. Ziv Rubinovitz, Academic Coordinator

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Prof. Shaul Chorev, Head of the Ezri Center, University of Haifa

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Alex Grinberg, Ezri Center, University of Haifa

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Dr. Efrat Sopher, Board Member, Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, Ezri Center, University of Haifa

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a Terrorist Organization – The UK Perspective

Shlomo Guetta, Research Fellow, Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, University of Haifa

Iranian Maritime Strategy

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Prof. Alexander Bligh, Senior Research Fellow, Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy, University of Haifa

New Saudi Policy Paradigms in Action: the Case of the Ukraine Crisis

Dr. Samuel Willner, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy, University of Haifa

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Eyal Hashkes, Independent Researcher

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Dr. Elai Rettig, Political Studies Department, Bar Ilan University

Implications of the Sanctions on Russia on the Oil Exports from the Gulf Countries

Dr. Moran Zaga, Research Fellow, Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy, University of Haifa

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Prof. Shaul Chorev

Summary of the 14th Annual Conference of the Ezri Center – Iran and the Gulf States in the Shadow of Recent Events

On 30 May 2022, the Ezri Center for Iran and Gulf States Research at the University of Haifa held its 14th Annual Conference on "Iran and the Gulf States in the Shadow of Recent Events". The conference was held in English via zoom, in order to allow for the participation of more scholars from abroad.

The conference was moderated by **Dr. Ziv Rubinovitz**, Research Coordinator for the Ezri Center. Below is a summary of the conference.

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Dr. Rubinovitz briefly presented the goals of the Ezri Center in promoting research on geopolitics, geostrategy and geoeconomics of Iran and the Gulf Region through academic studies, policy analysis, conferences and workshops. In recent years, the importance of the Gulf region in global affairs and for Israel in particular has increased, which has also raised the importance of the Center's activities.

Prof. Shaul Chorev, Head of the Ezri Center, welcomed the conference participants and remarked particularly on the participation of scholars and analysts from five different countries. Prof. Chorev began by acknowledging Dr. Efrat Sopher, the granddaughter of the late Meir Ezri after whom the center is named and Chair of the Ezri Center's Board of Advisors, for her sustained support for the further development and advancement of the Center, as well as her wider diplomatic academic and diplomatic activity and particularly her visits to the Gulf States since the signing of the Abraham Accords. He further acknowledged Mr. Yoram Ezri, the son of the late Meir Ezri, his wife and sister, with whom he met recently to discuss the activities of the Ezri Center, including ways to raise additional resources for the Center and to increase the volume of its activities and public impact, in Israel and beyond.

Prof. Chorev briefly reviewed the developments that have taken place in the Gulf region since the last annual conference of the Ezri Center, held about a year previously. He highlighted that the Gulf region, which includes the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, continues to be amongst the most volatile regions of the world and major zones of world affairs; strategically, economically, politically, and religiously. Due to their huge oil and gas resources, the regional states play a significant role in the global economy and this natural wealth have made the region very vital from the geostrategic point of view.

Iran's influence in the region continues to increase, and it is driving to confirm its status as a regional power with a leading role in the Shiite Axis in the Middle East, as well as aspiring for nuclear weapons. Iran and Israel, which have been struggling in the region for

years, have recently opened a new front in their conflict, this time on the high seas. Due to regional geopolitical transformations, the Haifa Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center has advocated that Israel should be moved from the US European Command to its Central Command – a change that occurred formally in September 2021, and which has the potential to create a regional coalition between Israel and Arab countries that have normalized ties with it, against the shared threat posed by Iran.

In April 2022, the Israel Navy, US 5th Fleet wrap up Intrinsic Defender exercise. The significance of this cooperation is intensified in the face of the challenges facing Israel in everything related to its freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aden and in the Arabian Sea. Since ships with ties to Israel started coming under Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) fire in March and April 2021, the United States CENTCOM and the 5th Fleet have provided Israeli ships in the Persian Gulf and nearby areas with escorts and given warnings about Iranian intentions to attack them.

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, diplomatic relations between Israel and the Gulf States have continued to expand. In March 2021, Bahrain appointed its first ambassador to Israel, who arrived to take up his post in August 2021. In September 2021, Israel opened a resident embassy in Manama. Besides the UAE and Bahrain, Oman was expected to be the third Gulf state to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. At present, however, it appears that Oman is undergoing a difficult transition period as the new Sultan confronts a dire economic situation while also trying to bring the next round of talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia to the capital of Muscat.

Following Operation Cast Lead in 2009, Qatar broke ties with Israel, but since 2018 Qatar has periodically provided millions of dollars in cash to Gaza's Hamas rulers, to pay for fuel for the Strip's power plant, fund infrastructure projects, and provide aid to tens of thousands of Gazan families. In November 2021, Qatar decided to sign a trade agreement with Israel in the diamond trade industry. Under the agreement, Israel will allow Qatar to enter the list of countries eligible to trade diamonds in its territory.

Ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia have evolved significantly in recent years, and the question is when and under which terms Saudi Arabia will join the Abraham Accords. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz's visit to Bahrain in February 2022 generated many headlines. But what attracted less media attention was the fact that his military plane cruised through Saudi airspace to reach Manama, becoming the first noncommercial Israeli flight to ever officially do so. For Saudi Arabia, aside from strengthened diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel, joining the Abraham Accords would principally help build a more robust Middle East coalition against Iran. In February 2022, Israel agreed for the first time to join Saudi Arabia and Oman in a naval exercise led by the United States, and recently, a reported mediation attempts come as U.S. President Joe Biden mulls a visit to Saudi Arabia next month, during a Middle East trip. Israel is considering seriously a Saudi

request to change the international status of two islands in the Red Sea, bringing Israel and Saudi Arabia closer to their first public agreement.

More than a year of negotiations in Vienna between Iran and world powers came close to reaching a new agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program, but they were bogged down over Iran's demand to remove the Revolutionary Guard from a U.S. terrorism blacklist – a move strongly opposed by many in the US Congress. Although the Biden administration has not declared a final decision on Iran's demand, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett mentioned that President Biden had told him that the U.S. would not remove the Revolutionary Guard from the terrorism blacklist. In addition to expanding its nuclear program, Iran has increased its other destabilizing activities in the region, including support for proxy militias, development of its ballistic missile program and attacks against U.S. and other forces in the Middle East.

On March 28, the foreign ministers of Israel, Egypt, Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates and the U.S. secretary of state assembled in an unprecedented summit in the Israeli Negev Kibbutz of Sde Boker. The conference was the first iteration of a permanent regional forum, as they reaffirmed the importance of growing ties between Israel and its Arab allies to create a front against shared regional foe Iran. The U.S. Secretary of State, Mr. Blinken, praised the growing economic ties, solar energy deals, and diplomatic forums taking places across the region in recent months because of the normalization between Israel and Arab states.

Like the rest of the Arab world, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine according to their interests and preferences. The sight of Russian forces massing on the border with Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin issuing increasingly aggressive threats against the Ukrainian leadership undoubtedly awakened memories of Saddam Hussein's behavior in the months leading up to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The Kuwaiti direct experience of invasion and occupation naturally resulted in a Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on February 24 that went farthest (among Gulf responses) in categorically rejecting the "use, threat to use or display of force" in settling international disputes. Kuwait was also the only Arab state among the 80 co-sponsors of the United Nations Security Council resolution on February 25 that upheld respect for the UN Charter, reaffirmed Ukrainian sovereignty, and rejected the use of force. While the fighting in Ukraine does not involve the Gulf States or present a direct threat to regional stability, there are numerous secondary impacts that could be consequential for these states' interests. These include disruption of energy markets, economic dislocation caused by international sanctions on Russia, and new points of tension in (some) political relationships with the Biden administration. Importantly, there is renewed focus on the balancing act between historically solid political and security integration into the American network of partnerships in the Middle East and the rapid growth of economic, energy, and investment connections with states such as Russia and

China. On 22 March, the leaders of Egypt, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, met in Sharm el-Sheikh for talks on the economic impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the growing influence of Iran in the region. Israel has made strengthening the accords a top priority, scheduling regular diplomatic meetings to member countries Egypt, Israel, and the UAE have emerged as an Arab-Israeli axis after Abu Dhabi normalized ties with Israel.

Prof. Chorev concluded his overview by saying that, although only one year has elapsed since the previous Ezri conference, many changes have occurred in the region. He wished all the participants an interesting and enriching conference.

Dr. Efrat Sopher welcomed the conference participants on behalf of the Ezri family. She thanked Prof. Chorev for his unswerving support and great knowledge, that contribute significantly to the Center's success, as well as the support staff of HMS, as well as the Center's board; the efforts that happen on a daily basis are nothing short of miraculous. Dr. Sopher also mentioned the participation of experts from the UAE and Bahrain in the conference.

When the late Meir Ezri founded the Center, his main goal was to foster people-to-people contact. Dr. Sopher's thesis was on the impact of personal relationships on diplomacy and foreign policy, and we are lucky to be able to witness that in the Abraham Accords. In Meir Ezri's long diplomatic career, including as Israel's first Ambassador to Iran, he managed to create such relations in various fields. However, he also witnessed the change in the Iranian regime's attitude towards Israel, and it was his hope that the Center's studies would develop strategies not only for thwarting threats from Iran, but also for building a lasting peace with Iran; she expressed the hope that such peaceful relations between the two countries could be reestablished in the future. She concluded by wishing the Center great success in its future endeavors.

First Session – Iran's Nuclear Program

Alex Grinberg, a Researcher at the Ezri Center and the organizer of this year's conference, presented Iran's present stance and its lessons from the war in Ukraine. He began his presentation by thanking the Ezri Center and Ezri family.

The prospects for a new deal with Iran are tenuous, and there are many drivers that impact the chances of reaching a deal. From the U.S. perspective, Israeli pressure is far from being the only driver decreasing the chances for a deal: unlike in the Obama era, the Biden administration is in no urge to reshape the Middle East or to appease Iran. The administration is fully aware that a deal would have a high political price tag: one can hardly interpret it differently than surrender to Iran, particularly against the backdrop of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine. The Gulf countries have their concerns about Iran whereas tighter coordination with them is required for the U.S. against

the background of the embargo on Russian hydrocarbons. Under these circumstances, the Biden administration cannot afford to discard the Gulf countries' concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program. Finally, there is concern about the potential for further nuclear proliferation from the Saudi side.

As for Iran, it will never consent to discuss either its ballistic missiles program or its regional activities or proxy wars (the latter is a euphemism for its proxy wars in the Middle East). Although sanction relief is necessary for the country's economy, it won't resolve its most pressing issues; any serious reform could jeopardize the regime's political survival. The regime feels relatively certain that for the United States, a military option is off the table, whereas Israel would not attack without U.S. approval.

In terms of the technical details of the program, Iran has sufficient fissile materials to build a nuclear device, but still has to pass several other thresholds: an explosive device, increased accuracy of its delivery platforms, and performing a nuclear test. Iran will likely acquire these capabilities at some point – the main question is the timeline.

Iran is also prone to domestic troubles. The Ra'isi government has no real means to address the current socio-economic woes: prices are sky-rocketing, and socio-economic protests have resumed in a way that the regime cannot put down. In contrast to previous protests, the fresh ones are becoming political. In the Iranian public perception, strikes against the regime are no longer seen as targeting Iran as a nation. Meantime in Lebanon, Hezbollah – a major ally of Iran – retains its grip on power in the country, but has been dealt an electoral blow and would find it more difficult in the future to portray itself as representing the political will of the people of Lebanon.

In terms of Iran's lessons from the war in Ukraine, public opinion can roughly be divided into moderates vs. hard-liners. For moderates, Russia is seen as imminently dangerous to its neighbors; the global wheat prices jump as a result of the war affecting Iran in terms of bread prices; sanctions on Russia have been demonstrated to damage its economy; and Russia is seen as Iran's commercial rival in the export of hydrocarbons.

Judging by media outlets affiliated with the hard-liners and the IRGC, the war in Ukraine demonstrates the unreliability of international treaties, with specific emphasis on Ukraine's renouncing of its nuclear arsenal – the conclusion is that one should never give up its nuclear shield; that missiles have critical importance in both defense and deterrence, as Ukraine is unable to hit Russia's soil while Russia's missiles compensate for the incompetence of its army in the battlefield; and, finally, that drones are an important part of a state's asymmetric military capacity.

The Iranian regime is revolutionary – a tendency that generates confrontation. Losing the revolutionary dimension is tantamount to losing the regime's *raison d'être*. Iran's conflict with Israel stems from the tenets of the Khomeinist ideology and has no geopolitical

dimension whatsoever. However, Khamenei is very cautious and pragmatic in his own way – he is wary of war or direct confrontation but is likely to continue to wage a proxy war against Israel and the United States.

In conclusion, the lessons from the war in Ukraine only heighten the regime's determination to acquire nuclear weapons. The nuclear program will continue, but its tempo may vary. In the event of growing internal instability, the regime will need nuclear weapons even more. Nuclear weapons serve to amplify the power of a state and decrease its vulnerability; at the same time, it also means that Iran's proxies like Hezbollah may feel safer launching attacks under Tehran's nuclear umbrella.

Dr. Yaacov Hecht, Research Fellow at the Chaikin Chair of Geostrategy at the University of Haifa, discussed whether there is a divergence of opinions within Iran's leadership regarding the nuclear agreement. Dr. Hecht said that the public image which the Iranian regime has been projecting for over a decade is that the policies it pursues in the negotiation process for a nuclear agreement represents a consensus within Iranian leadership and enjoys the blessing of the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah **Ali Khamenei**. Any disagreement about priorities is disguised behind a heavy cloak of secrecy. However, public and media statements over the past year have demonstrated that members of the Iranian leadership have both a moderate and an extremist approach towards the nuclear issue and policies in the Middle East.

In April 2021, information was leaked about harsh criticism sounded by former Foreign Minister Mohammed Jawwad Zarif, according to which Iran has always prioritized the military activities of Quds Force under General Qasem Suleimani, over the diplomatic route and that Suleimani acted, together with President Putin, to prevent the signing of the JCPOA with the P5 in 2015. The current Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, who is known for his close ties with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Suleimani, was quoted in March 2022 as saying that the removal of the IRGC from the US terrorist list was not of critical importance to Iran in its negotiations with the United States and the other foreign powers. This is a well-known Iranian demand that is considered crucial, especially for the IRGC and the conservative branch within Iran. The IRGC not only plays a key role in Iran's military establishment, but is also running wide economic, financial, and commercial activities related to Iran's oil and gas sectors and their sale abroad. The IRGC also plays a major role in other sectors of Iran's economy.

Only in 2021, Iran and the IRGC managed to sell oil for \$25 billion to China, Syria, Venezuela and other countries – a sharp rise of 40 percent compared to the revenue from the sale of oil in 2020, this despite sanctions by the Trump administration in 2018-2019 on the oil sector and other parts of the Iranian economy.

The removal of sanctions, which is supposed to be an integral part of any new nuclear agreement, would supply tens of billions of dollars to the dwindling Iranian economy. If anyone thought that the Foreign Minister's remarks were not relevant to the shaping of Iran's policy and position, Abdollahian repeated this remark at the Davos Conference on May 26, where he said that the removal of economic sanctions is far more important to Iran than the removal of the IRGC from the list of organizations supporting terrorism.

When Foreign Minister Abdollahian first made this remark two months ago, he was criticized by conservative members of the Iranian Majles, who are considered to be close allies of the IRGC. Members of the Majles accused that the Foreign Minister was neglecting one of the most important components of the Iranian negotiation strategy.

The fact that the remarks were repeated again clearly demonstrates the existence of a sharp disagreement regarding the negotiation strategy. This, despite the Foreign Minister's close ties with the IRGC and conservative elements within the Iranian regime in the past, and his remarks at his confirmation speech in the Majlis in July 2021 that diplomatic activities are intended to support Iran's military activities throughout the Middle East.

It is unclear why this issue received outside publicity, but it is possible that it represents wider disagreements within the Iranian regime regarding its strategy towards the United States and the Middle East.

Dr. Clement Therme, Teaching Fellow at the University of Montpellier III, made a presentation on Iran, the JCPOA and the future of regional (un)stability. Addressing the previous presentation, Dr. Therme said that it is a fact that some disagreements exist within the Iranian regime – but it is also a tool to confuse Iran's diplomatic rivals, since it allows supporters of the agreement in the West to claim that a moderate position exists and should be encouraged. To analyze this dual identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is important to understand the key national security organizations and different and competing definitions of national security within Iran. Finally, it is important to understand Iran's relationship with key regional and international actors.

The confusion about Iran's internal dynamics has its origins in the 19th century, when Iran acted as a buffer state; Iran is therefore used to using foreign influence as a way to produce internal politics, and this trend reaches its summit with the Islamic Republic.

The debate between "conservative" and "reformist" factions is essentially a debate about Iran's identity and interests in the Middle East. Iran is a revolutionary state in that it employs not only state-to-state tools but also engages directly with populations of regional countries. There are different views within Iran about the use of proxy actors – reformists see them as a bargaining tool for leverage in the nuclear negotiations, whereas for conservatives they are an end in themselves and are part of Iran's revolutionary identity.

The link between economic interests and security dimensions was a key during the "maximum pressure" campaign by the Trump Administration, since the proxy system became a tool for bypassing US economic sanctions, serving the economic survival of Iran and not only its ideological aspirations. The problem with informal networks is that the state has weaker control over them, and the decision-making process is unclear.

As mentioned in a previous presentation, strikes against the regime are no longer perceived by the public as strikes against the nation-state but rather as strikes against the Iranian regime. This is because the tensions between the state and the majority of the public opinion are so high that any rival of the Islamic Republic has some positive perception in certain segments of the population, both in Iran and abroad. Despite these tensions, there are also some local compromises between the regime and the population; the Iranian regime is a complex one, and this is important to remember.

Since 2009, the intelligence services of the IRGC are the main security body in Iran, following the promotion of Hossein Taeb. The role of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security is also a question. The intelligence services of the IRGC are now examining candidates for local elections, which was not the case previously. The role of the Basij inside and outside Iran also remains unresolved, including a possible link between external and internal Basij. This projection of the security apparatus both inside and outside Iran, is also built to confront the risk of regime change from outside, such as the discourse by the George W. Bush administration. This reactive dimension exists, but is often over-emphasized in the West in relation to the proactive choice made by Iran. This is another difficulty in understanding the Islamic Republic of Iran and negotiating with it.

President Rouhani's attempt to disconnect Iran's regional activities from the nuclear issue failed when the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA. What change since this attempt, is that there is no appeasement now in the Middle East. There is no reactive dimension and no Iranian proxy network that can be used as a bargaining chip in the nuclear negotiation; the two areas – the nuclear negotiation and regional activities – are now largely disconnected.

The ethnic tension concerning Sunni minorities is a tool used by the regime in order to build a counternarrative from the Islamic Republic perspective saying that Iran is the victim of external pressure.

Iran's threat assessment is that it is dangerous to negotiate directly with the US, and indirect dialogue through European counterparts is preferred despite the setbacks caused by this process. The outcome of the negotiations is currently dependent less on technical issues and more on the state of bilateral relations between the United States and Iran; in this context, Iran is unlikely to trust the economic benefits of a deal that does not remove the IRGC from the list of terrorist supporters. Iran has less incentives, and with the war in

Ukraine and the rise in global oil prices, feels that it is in a stronger position that six months ago.

The broader question that is being asked since 2009, is whether we are likely to see a regime change in Iran – not towards a democratic one, but a transformation from a religious to a military dictatorship. The main cause for optimism is Iranian public opinion which, despite not having a direct influence on policy, shapes the incentives of the different parties.

In the last year we are seeing the rise of Iran's network of influence as a deterrent against regional rivals, Israel and the US. However, Iran's aim is not to use this network as leverage in the negotiations. At the same time, these proxy networks have a high cost, especially given Iran's economic difficulties. Iran's economic failure may lead it to moderate in the future – but not necessarily in the foreseeable one.

What is often misunderstood in the US is that the Islamic revolution in Iran was not nationalistic but internationalist in nature. Large sections of the public in Iran oppose the religious tendency of the regime. The Islamic Republic and its security apparatus face a soft power problem – not only in Iran since 2009 but also outside it, in Lebanon and Iraq. This creates limitations to Iran's rise in the Middle East.

Q&A Session

To Prof. Chorev – do you think that the Abraham Accords could support any form of normalization between Israel and Iran?

Prof. Chorev: The main issue is not the conflict between the Jewish people and the Iranian people. In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel and Iran held close cooperation in many areas. The problem is the current regime and its ideology of exporting the Shiite revolution throughout the Middle East. In that sense, the Abraham Accords will not help to renew relations; it is possible, however, that some member states of the Abraham Accord would negotiate with Iran. It should also be recalled that Iran is trying to overcome economic sanctions by creating new routes to the Gulf States.

How do Iran's internal domestic politics today affect its relations with the UAE, since the UAE have recently rekindled their partnership? And why is Iran interested in rekindling its ties with the UAE?

Mr. Grinberg: I wouldn't say that Iran's domestic politics has much to do with its foreign policy, since Iran's regional decision-making has nothing to do with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but is the prerogative of the Leader and the IRGC. Secondly, Iran also has a pragmatic-economic aspect to its behavior, and in this sense the UAE is an important trading partner. At the same time, Iran is also in dispute with the UAE regarding the

sovereignty over contested islands and relations are complicated. Iranian leadership has also warned the UAE against the mistake of strengthening ties with the "Zionist Regime".

Dr. Therme: Iran is also looking to divide the Gulf countries for its diplomatic benefit and use them to bypass US economic sanctions. Internal policy does not play a strong role, except for the fact that the success of Dubai is considered a failure of the Iranian-Shiite revolution.

To Dr. Therme – Do you think that we in the West simply do not understand Iran and the Iranian regime or their version of democracy?

Dr. Therme: I think we understand very well. There is no good answer to this – I think we are aware of the internal dynamic, and both sides understand each other and attempt to manipulate the other. It is important to understand that there is limited access – there is no US embassy in Teheran, and European embassies do not have access to the Supreme Leader. The problem is not necessarily understanding but access.

Mr. Grinberg: I am sending to everyone here an Iranian article titled "Being Jewish does not mean not being a Nazi".¹ It was published on a Russian propaganda outlet and praises the antisemitic statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. It is common to see such articles, which claim that Lavrov's statement is a correct reflection and that there are proof of the inhumanity of Zionism and of the Jewish religion. Such articles can be seen on a daily basis, and there is no reason to assume that they only reflect the opinion of the writers. In that sense, we do understand Iran and its stance.

Q: Who has the best economic and diplomatic relations with Iran among the European countries?

Dr. Therme: the "best relationship" is hard to define nowadays, but the key advocates of dialogue with Iran are Italy and Austria, who have strong economic interests in Iran and remain relatively neutral from a political standpoint. For Germany it is more complicated – they have economic cooperation, but would never receive the President of Iran for instance, due to Germany's special relationship with Israel – which is quite a unique case. France and the UK also maintain relationships with Iran.

Q: in the new negotiations, the goal is clearly to deal with Iran's nuclear program, but is also about Iran's place and status in the world. What would be the "golden path" of balancing between these two goals?

Mr. Grinberg: such a path does not exist, since demands regarding Iran's regional activities are a euphemism for Iran's proxy wars – a demand that Iran would never except, and justifiably from its point of view, since missiles and proxies remain Iran's only tool – either

1 [یهودی بودن به معنای نازی نبودن نیست](#), *Sputnik*, May 3, 2022.

for defense or offense. Besides these, Iran is a relatively weak country with a porous border. The main mistake of Western observers consists in viewing the negotiation as equivalent to a litigation between two companies in the West – currently, no settlement seems likely. The minimum that the West is requiring does not meet the maximum that Iran is willing to concede.

Dr. Hecht: we have to remember following the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, energy markets are in crisis. The Biden Administration has a clear incentive to bring Iran back into the international energy market. This is why in recent weeks the Biden administration has lowered its criticism of Saudi Arabia for human rights violations. The Biden administration, and the West in general, has a clear economic and financial interest in reaching any kind of new deal with Iran.

Second Session – Iran's Policy and Strategy

Jonathan Benzion, a Ph.D. Candidate at the Sorbonne, discussed foreign policy and coercive instruments of power in the Islamic Revolution of Iran – a constitutional review. At the outset, we have to understand that we are dealing with a theocracy. Looking at the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the original Persian may help us balance between the ideal and the real on issues such as the use of force, exporting the revolution, the security apparatus of the regime, as well as foreign and domestic politics.

In this study, the Constitution of Iran is seen as an independent variable, and its hegemonic aspirations as a dependent variable. The Constitution, as the foundational legislation, reflects the spirit of the Iranian regime. Even before the Islamic Revolution, Shi'ism and political authority in Iran went hand in hand. To better understand the regime, it is hence useful to go through key words in the aforementioned legislative document.

The regime's principles are based on the ideas of Khomeini. *Khomeinism* should be understood as a political movement, and its principles analyzed and understood under these optics. Khomeini aspired to establish a nation united in creed and thought. Iran's Constitution sets out a plan for Islamic governance, which can be understood in various ways. In it, we may realize that the "Islamic ideological struggle" – mentioned in the Iranian Constitution – is not only part of the Republic's backbone, but is also its crown and banner, both domestically and internationally.

In the exporting of the revolution, there is a mix of political and Islamic ideas, which are not separated from Shi'ite Islamic thought. From these tenets, two issues with wider ramifications may be identified: Iran's sponsorship of *Khomeinism* and its foreign policy basis. The Iranian Shi'ite theocracy should be approached as a political system where divine matters hold a fundamental role in the expression of its legislation, where the role

of Imamate and continuous leadership is the export of the Islamic revolution. At the same time, it should also be recognized that *Khomeinism* is pragmatic in nature.

In terms of the legal platform for exporting *Khomeinism*, article 3 of the Constitution frames Iran's foreign policy around Islamic criteria, a fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and an unsparing support to all oppressed people of the world – the latter article played a major role in Iranian ties and propaganda in Latin America. Chapter 10 of the Constitution states that the policy of the Islamic Republic is based on the rejection of any form of domination; the preservation of the independence and territorial integrity of Iran; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; a posture of non-alignment with hegemonist superpowers; and the maintenance of mutual peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states. Article 153 forbids any agreement that may result in foreign domination over the natural resources, economy, army, culture and other aspects of the national life of Iran. And article 154 affirms that Iran scrupulously refrains from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations and reiterates its support for the fight of the oppressed against the oppressors throughout the world.

In terms of coercive instruments of power, the two major apparatuses are provided by this canon, namely, the army and the IRGC. A decisive element in Iran's foreign policy doctrine is the endurance of its revolutionary leadership and the maintaining of hard power to preserve it. To understand Iran's foreign policy drivers, three factors should be taken into account: Iran's nation-state formation process and national traumas derived thereof; Iran's historical development as a Shi'ite state; as well as the role of the IRGC and the implementation of the Islamic Republic's theological seminaries. From this perspective we may discern that the top priority of the Islamic Republic and its law enforcement branches is the survival of the regime.

In conclusion, a better understanding of Iran's Constitution could help us understand where the Iranian regime may compromise and where it may not. Iran is a rational, pragmatic actor, but one with a strong ideological character.

Dr. Efrat Sopher presented some thoughts on the status of the IRGC in UK law. Last week, President Biden assured that the IRGC will not be removed from the US list of foreign terrorist organizations, where it was prescribed in 2019. On the other hand, following the killing in broad daylight of the key IRGC operative Col. Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, Iran has gone very public in vowing retaliation, and it remains to be seen how Iran will respond. There are some reports that Khodaei was planning attacks against Israel and Jews in Cyprus and Turkey, and therein lies the problem: other countries worldwide must take the threat of the IRGC seriously and reflect it in law. There are parallels with the Russia-Ukraine example from which the West has much to learn.

Following the Abraham Accords, the balance of power has flipped on its head with the Gulf States reversing the Arab narrative and normalizing relations with Israel to balance against Iran as well as promote other interests in technology and trade. The same nature of relations now exists between these countries and Israel that used to exist between Israel and Iran in the 1950s and 1960s, and hopefully strategic relations will strengthen as well in light of shared interests. It is important to recognize, and Iran is also recognizing that Israel and the United States are not alone – including in grappling with the activities of the IRGC.

In terms of the nuclear talks, lawyers in the West still consider Iranian human violations from a legal perspective to hold Iran to account. The UK, for example, is considering a range of other targets under its new global human rights sanctions regulations. Given that the IRGC and its leadership have committed attacks against the UK and its citizens as well as various human rights abuses, IRGC targets should be included in any application of sanctions under the new regulations. We can see a shift in law where Sweden, for instance, has arrested suspected war criminals such as Hamid Nouri – for his involvement in the massacre in Teheran in the 1980s of over 5,000 political prisoners – under universal jurisdiction. International human rights laws can be applied where political will exists.

The entire region has global significance, and relations between Iran and the region can improve or deteriorate very rapidly, as was mentioned by previous speakers. Iran's instant ability to fight through proxies, is something that should be kept in mind in the West. There are parallels between Iran's credible show of force by proxies in Syria and Lebanon, and Russia's actions in Ukraine. Similar tactics have been used by Russia and Iran, and even from a more announcement and discourse perspective, the West must not be naïve and take leaders at their words. When Putin wrote an article last year that detailed his imperial plans regarding Ukraine, it was dismissed by many in the West as internal posturing; ignoring these warning signs largely got us to where we are today. Similarly, Khamenei's February 2019 manifesto included a vision of a purified Iran a greater role for the IRGC to help realize Ra'issi's grand civilizational ambitions. It would be inconceivable to imagine a Western country invading another, but it is not inconceivable to envision an Iranian full-scale attack, and the UK and others must safeguard against such a scenario.

Back to the IRGC and the UK's legal stance – both Hezbollah and Hamas have been designated in the UK as terrorist organizations, and the IRGC is their parent organization and therefore must follow suit. The IRGC has already been so proscribed by the United States, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. It has been previously sanctioned, but 2019 was the first time that the US put a state organization on the FTO list, which was groundbreaking. The UK has proscribed officials tied to the IRGC, but not the IRGC itself or the Quds Force. In January 2022, the legal status of the IRGC was raised in the House of Lords, and this debate was widely watched and covered by the Gulf states.

Since that time, neither the IRGC as an entity nor any Iranians under individual sanctions have been prescribed. This comes in light of the west failing to bring the IRGC into account for its destabilizing regional activities, and specifically the killing of a UK national, Adrian Underwood, in the maritime attack on 29 July 2021 on a commercial vessel and the downing of a Ukrainian commercial flight in January 2020. The IRGC does legally fulfill the UK parameters for a terrorist organization since it represents a clear threat of violence to British nationals; a clear threat to a defined section of the British population; and has intimidated and carried out violence against UK targets and its allies.

The IRGC budget is only growing, and has been doubled in 2022 to \$20 billion, demonstrating its rising significance within Iran as Ra'issi consolidates his power, seeking to become Khamenei's successor. Conventionally, Iran's military capability, including missiles and UAVs, threatens not only Israel but other states in the region. On the naval sphere, the Iranian and IRGC navies seem to have begun collaborating, which should be observed carefully by the West and by regional states.

Under UK law, there are two mechanisms to prescribe a terrorist organization: the UK Terrorism Act 2000 and the Magnitsky sanctions regulations, and this is something that all organizations who are interested in combatting the Iranian threat are following very closely. The UK government is open and amenable and does appreciate the threat of the IRGC to the UK, and the UK Prime Minister and Home Office Minister would be best placed to designate the IRGC. From a policy perspective, prescription is very important because of the clear threat to UK nationals, as researched among others by Brian Jenkins; threat to the UK Jewish community; and threat to other states.

Capt. (ret.) Shlomo Guetta, Research Fellow at the Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center at the University of Haifa, presented Iran's maritime strategy. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and even more so following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, Iran has emerged as a regional power in the Middle East. As such, it deploys its military in various arena, including the naval one.

Iran in fact has two navies: the Navy of the Islamic Republic and the Navy of the Revolutionary Guard. The Persian Gulf is under the responsibility of the IRGCN and the Gulf of Oman is under the responsibility of the IRIN. Except for these combat fleets, another marine component is Iran's shipping fleet, made out of the Iranian National Shipping Company and the Iranian National Tanker Company (NITC). NITC tankers, along with dozens of other foreign-flagged tankers, have in recent years transported millions of barrels of Iranian oil to circumvent US sanctions.

Iran's immediate maritime space extends into the area of the Persian Gulf, Oman Bay and the Caspian Sea. In light of its expanding influence and proxies, Iran's maritime space has expanded to include the Gulf of Aden and South of the Red Sea, The shores of the Levant in

Lebanon and Syria, and the Gaza Strip. As part of the doctrine of "naval diplomacy", Iran's navy has expanded its activities in recent years into the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Iran's influence in the Middle East is far-reaching, and extends to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and the Gaza Strip.

The Iranian Navy has a "diplomacy doctrine". It employs conventional Russian and Iranian-made submarine, Iranian-made frigates on the basis of UK models, and the Makaran "mother ship" able to carry helicopter, drones, missiles and a large stockpile of naval weapons. In 2021, the Iranian Navy conducted a "naval diplomacy cruise" that lasted about 130 days and spanned nearly 45,000 km, from Iran via the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, to Saint Petersburg, and back via the Mediterranean and through the Suez Canal.

The IRGCN is more offensive in nature, and is tasked with carrying out Iranian terrorist operations. Besides smaller boats, it is undertaking major naval force building, including mother ships and three Qassim Suleimani class missile corvettes based on a Chinese model – a process that has the potential to expand its mission beyond the Persian Gulf, possibly into the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. In recent weeks, it was revealed that the IRGCN has been converting a container ship to be used as a floating port / weapons depot, including carrying UAVs.

Iran has supplied cruise missiles, UAVs, mines and explosive boats to its Houthi proxies in Yemen. Since mid-2019, following the re-imposition of sanctions by the Trump Administration, Iran has hit several tankers in the Hormuz region and Persian Gulf. During 2021, four hostile actions were carried out in the region, this time against Israeli-related naval targets. Last Friday, the IRGCN seized two Greek tankers in the Persian Gulf, in response to Greece assisting the US in seizing an Iranian oil tanker in the Mediterranean over alleged sanctions violations.

The Iranian strategy at the national level is intended to maintain the territorial integrity of the republic; adhere to the Islamic Revolution and the laws of religion; and achieve regional political, economic and religious influence. The main components of Iran's strategy are long-range missiles and UAVs, future nuclear weapons, naval forces, and regional proxies. Another component of the Iranian strategy is deterrence and warning of a surprise attack to avoid a quick defeat – as a lesson from the Iraq war.

As a derivative of the national strategy, Iran's main naval goals are to defend the country's shores and shipping routes, which make up 90% of its imports and exports. The maritime space in which Iran has a clear interest is called the "golden triangle" and include the straits of Malka, Bab El-Mandab and Hormuz. The IRGCN has a doctrine of asymmetric naval combat, especially in the Persian Gulf, but also elsewhere in support of proxies.

In the past, there was competition between the IRIN and IRGCN, but currently the two are cooperating. The IRGCN is looking to increase its capabilities to larger vessels, to be able to control larger areas.

In conclusion, Iran undoubtedly has a naval strategy. While this strategy is largely defensive, it also has an offensive component, achieved both through its military and naval forces and through regional proxies. Iran's naval power can be defined as a "green water" fleet.

Q&A Session

Question to Dr. Sopher: how should the Gulf States deal with Iran's proxies, specifically with the establishment of an Iranian drone base in Iraq and possibly in Yemen in the future and the threat that these pose to the region?

Dr. Sopher: concerted action with the UAE and other Gulf partners is the most effective way to deal with Iranian proxies further afield. Continued diplomatic action and international outreach is very important in that respect – it is valuable to not be alone and have other people in the room raising the same concerns.

Third Session – Saudi Arabia

Dr. Samuel Willner, a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Chaikin Chair of Geostrategy at the University of Haifa, discussed the nexus between Saudi oil politics, the economy and the survival of the Saudi monarchy.

Saudi Arabia is currently facing multiple challenges, both domestically and geopolitically. Domestically, the Saudi population – including foreign workers – has increased by almost 70% since 2001, which poses challenges to sustained economic growth, specifically one that is primarily based on oil resources. About a third of Saudi Arabian oil is consumed locally, which is problematic for the Saudi economy. Oil prices fluctuate, and have dropped significantly both in 2008 and during the Covid-19 crisis in 2020; despite attempts at diversification, the value of Saudi exports is very strongly correlated with global oil prices. The lower the price of oil, the more Saudi Arabia's current account balance goes down. GDP per capita has grown significantly since 2001, but has been relatively stable since 2009. Saudi government expenditures have led to more deficits since 2014, and the public debt has also been going up since the same year, rising to 30% of GDP – though this includes expenditures on some large national projects, and is still below the level of many European countries.

The appointment of Mohammad Bin Salman reflects several important issues with which the Saudi government is currently dealing and a substantial shift in the kingdom's policymaking. The appointment reflects Saudi disappointment with US Middle East Policy, and signals that the Saudi leadership is strong and also that it is adjusting its foreign and

domestic policies (this includes, for instance, the above-discussed issues of domestic economy). Preserving the Saudi monarchy remains the overall goal.

There is a misconception that MBS is dictating policies, but in fact policies are negotiated within the royal family. His appointment could indicate that the monarchy plans to take a tougher stance in the foreign policy arena; develop new alliances and reduce its dependence on the US; and meet the growing needs of the very young Saudi population. It could also indicate a desire to avoid a possible succession crisis in the future, and even prevent the disintegration of the kingdom, which could result should King Salman be replaced by a weak leader.

It has been claimed that Saudi foreign policy interests are not as aligned with those of the US as they have been in the past, and that Saudi oil policy has become more confrontational. To a certain extent, this is correct. Overall, the Saudi-US relationship has mostly been beneficial to both parties; for the Saudis, the bottom line is how this relationship could help to preserve the monarchy. At the center of the relationship are Saudi oil exports to the US and its allies; trade in various commodities, especially US supply of advanced weapons systems; and informal US guarantees to protect the Saudi monarchy.

If the monarchy is to be preserved, the kingdom must be ruled by a strong and shrewd leader who is able to build coalitions and alliances and has the natural ability to shape familial consensus through consultation. Most importantly, the Saudis need an adroit king on the throne, in line with the traditional Saudi principle of royal succession.

Eyal Hashkes, a Management Consultant and Independent Researcher, presented the Saudi vision for 2030 and its implications for Israel. The Saudi Vision for 2030 is a good start, but still behind where Saudi Arabia would have liked its economy to be, and far behind the UAE, who have launched similar reforms over a decade ago.

The Saudi Vision 2030 was announced by MBS in 2016, during a pivotal time in the kingdom for multiple reasons, including the decline in oil prices. The vision is to transform the Saudi economy across three pillars: ambitious nation, vibrant society and thriving economy. The main goal is to diversify the Saudi economy away from oil and towards technology and innovation, based on many sub-objectives and cultural shifts.

Saudi Arabia is portraying Vision 2030 as a success, based on indicators such as a rise in non-oil revenues, nominal GDP and investments. Some significant actions have been taken by the Saudi government such as the imposition of a 5% VAT tax in 2018, for the first time in the kingdom's history – which was then tripled following the Covid-19 crisis. This represents a shift from the government solely relying on oil revenues as a source of income. Another major change was a limited IPO of Saudi Aramco, which also meant a lot of transparency and reform in the company. The money from the IPO could support the construction of megaprojects. Saudi Arabia has opened itself up to tourism and has

implemented major cultural-economic changes such as opening cinemas, allowing greater status for women in the workplace and more. Lastly, Saudi Arabia has instituted a tax on foreign employees as a form of incentivizing more local work.

The most apparent changes are cultural, but major attempts have been made to change the economy as well. However, Saudi Arabia's GDP is still strongly correlated with oil, and Saudi Oil Minister announced in May that the kingdom is on track to lift its production capacity by more than 1 million barrels per day by 2026-2027. Both in action and rhetoric, oil is likely to remain a big part of Saudi Arabia's economy – but this may change if another drop in oil prices occurs.

In 2014, about 85% of the national budget was based on oil. This number has dropped due to the decline in oil prices, but the current trend is not foreseen to change in the coming years – by 2026, 50% of the Saudi budget is still expected to be based on oil, which largely maintains dependence. A similar trend can be observed in terms of the share of oil in Saudi GDP, which has generally increased since the announcement of Vision 2030 in 2016. Another major aspect of the vision, bringing more foreign direct investment into Saudi Arabia, remains quite low and again below 2016 measures – possibly owing to the political status of Saudi Arabia which has lost favor due to its actions in Yemen, the Khashoggi assassination and others.

Comparing with the UAE, Saudi Arabia remains significantly more dependent on the export of oil products. Despite some successes, Saudi Arabia has not yet reached a trajectory to reduce its dependence on oil.

A major part of Vision 2030 is to use surplus money for the establishment of megaprojects, such as NEOM, being built next to Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. NEOM includes several projects such as "the Line", a vertical city of 170 km in length with no cars and based on ultra-fast trains; Trojena, a futuristic vacation zone; Oxagon, a fully automated port that is also an artificial island; and others. Some aspects of NEOM are likely unrealistic, but significant resources are being poured into it and tenders are being published. NEOM is planned to be a major, Dubai-style city is thus being built just south of Eilat, which could present a major opportunity for Israel. It has been reported that several Israeli companies are already a part of this process and that MBS chose the location of the city partly to accommodate bringing in Israeli technology. This demonstrates that increased Israeli connectivity with Saudi Arabia will not be of the same style of the Abraham Accords, where relations sprang almost instantaneously, but through a gradual process – and NEOM could be the entry point into that. It is possible that different regulations in NEOM could allow for Israeli companies to act openly as part of the city. The importance of Vision 2030's success for MBS presents an opportunity for increased connectivity with Israel.

Q&A Session

Q: Is there a chance that Saudi Arabia will undergo an "industrial revolution" and become a strong industrial center in the Middle East?

Mr. Hashkes: Saudi Arabia is already an industrial center in many aspects, of course in oil but also in similar industries. The desired move towards other industries will not be quick, but the large investment into megaprojects means that at least some industries will develop, even if they don't necessarily make the most economic sense. It can therefore be expected that Saudi Arabia will become an industrial player in additional industries in the coming years.

Dr. Willner: I agree with that. In order to ensure the survival of the Saudi monarchy, it's important to diversify and get more investments into the Saudi economy.

Q: To what extent does the war in Ukraine and the resulting distancing from Russia create opportunities for Saudi Arabia to strengthen ties with European countries?

Dr. Willner: Because of the importance of energy security and developing alternatives to Russian energy – which is very important for European countries – there is likely to be increased cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other energy producers in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia may want something in return, perhaps in the political sense.

Mr. Hashkes: I agree and think this could be an opportunity for MBS to redeem himself after the Khashoggi assassination and other recent events.

Q: Do you see any chance of Saudi financial investments in the Israeli economy and shared Saudi-Israeli industrial and infrastructure projects?

Mr. Hashkes: we are seeing this happening, usually below the surface, and are likely to see it more and more in the coming years.

Dr. Willner: I agree.

Fourth Session – The Gulf States

Dr. Elai Rettig, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University, discussed Russian Sanctions and the Oil Export Policy of the Arab Gulf. Currently, there is a lot of talk about an embargo on Russian oil imports but not a lot of action. In order to be able to implement such an embargo, the oil would need to come from somewhere else – and this would have to be the Gulf States.

Meanwhile, just the threat of an embargo has led to changes in the global oil market, with Russia trying to sell much of its oil to China and India in discounted prices. In the past 10–15

years, 90% of the oil that passes through the Straits of Hormuz goes to the East, while over 70% of Russian oil goes west – but now we are seeing a switch in which Russia is sending oil east, cutting the market share of the Gulf States. As the summer looms, it would be even more convenient for Russia to send oil to East Asia through the northern route. The Gulf, in turn, sells more of its oil to the West – through the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal – and this would likely create challenges and opportunities for Israel.

In terms of challenges, more tankers going through the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb means more opportunities for Iran to sabotage them. While closing the Straits of Hormuz is not a credible threat, in the sense that it would harm Iran's own economy, the Bab el-Mandeb Straits are a different issue. At the same time, this creates an opportunity for closer cooperation between the Israeli navy and Arab navies in the region, as has been happening already. Additionally, more oil going through the Suez Canal means that there is more economic sense in using the Israeli EAPC (Europe Asia Pipeline Company) pipeline, which is cheaper. Israel has an agreement in place with the UAE to use the pipeline, but it is not being implemented due to environmental concerns; we are likely to see more pressure from Europe to activate it, especially if Saudi Arabia joins the mix.

So far, none of this is actually happening – the Emirates and the Saudis are not actually abiding by the Biden administration's request to produce more oil to enable an embargo on Russia. This has political reasons, but this presentation will focus on the economic reasons, which are more fundamental in the UAE. The Gulf States have worked a lot to diversify their economy and reduce their dependence on oil, and are unlikely to throw all that away for what they see as a temporary crisis between Russia, Ukraine and the West. Moreover, the Gulf States' plans include Russia.

OPEC has proven repeatedly that it doesn't work without Russia in it. Members simply cheat when asked to cut or increase production, and for many years Saudi Arabia and the UAE have carried OPEC on their backs. Saudi Arabia said enough, and in 2014 this led to a drop in prices until, in 2016, the Saudis managed to get Russia on board to create OPEC Plus, which restored oil prices to their former levels. Every time Saudi Arabia and Russia got into any sort of dispute, oil prices crashed again, and vice versa. Russia needs to be in OPEC in order for it to work – and Biden's request is essentially a request to destroy OPEC or OPEC Plus. This is a big request, that requires big compensations.

Gulf countries need oil prices to remain relatively high – about \$84 per barrel to break even, due to their massive subsidies to their own populations, sometimes at costs as high as 15% of their GDP. At the same time, this population also wastes a lot of oil and gas due to subsidies.

The second issue that is preventing the Saudis and Gulf States from meeting the Biden administration's demands is that they are thinking long term, in terms of decades forward

– in preparation for the day after oil, which is long in the future. Even if oil prices go down to \$20 per barrel, the Gulf States would still make a profit since their oil is the cheapest to produce. As oil prices drop, oil industries in the West will collapse, but the Gulf would remain. Over the next 20-30 years, the Gulf States' market share will only increase. To accomplish this, they need to release more oil to the market, which in turn means that they need to develop new ways to produce electricity, since they are almost the only countries in the world that still use oil for electricity production. They are trying to develop nuclear, solar, wind and hydrogen energy – not for environmental reasons but for economic ones.

Israel is quite good at developing technologies that produce energy in more efficient ways, clean tech etc. – due, among others, to the Arab oil embargo – and there is room for cooperation. At the end of the day, however, this is only a delay tactic for a future where the world will transition away from oil, and in which the Gulf State will need to undergo deep socio-economic reforms, including involving more women in the workforce. In the interim stages, they will likely try to take the lead not only in oil but in oil-based products of various sorts, as well as other industries.

The more stability and economic breathing room they have, the more smoothly they will be able to undergo these transitions. Some countries are more able to maintain subsidies while undergoing economic transition due to large financial reserves, while others cannot. The foreign currency reserves of the Gulf States mean that they should be okay even if oil prices become very low; Iran – significantly less. In the meantime, during the Russia-Ukraine crisis, oil prices remain high and there is therefore no incentive for the Gulf States to want the crisis to end.

Dr. Moran Zaga, a Research Fellow at the Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy and a Researcher of Political Geography and the UAE at the University of Haifa, discussed the Gulf States' narratives to regional attacks. The Gulf has always been a region of conflict and violence. The UAE, for example, took an active part in several wars in the region: the Gulf War in 1990, Afghanistan in 2001, and Syria, Yemen and Libya in 2014. None of these countries is an enemy of the UAE, and none of them attacked the UAE. It is therefore interesting to examine the diplomacy and the reasoning that was used to justify the Gulf States' participation in conflicts.

There is a difference between the narrative being used to justify participation in a conflict and the actual reasons for it; the study presented here refers mainly to the narrative and "marketing" of conflict to the public. The components in building a narrative are selected audience, desired effect, argument being used and action that corresponds to the argument. In some cases, the action is actually opposed to the argument – but there are many arguments that can be used to justify actions that are actually similar to those of the opponent.

Three types of arguments repeat themselves in the Arabian Gulf. The first is the moral justification – usually around fighting terrorism and extremism and promoting justice. The emphasis here is on the goodness of the country engaging in the conflict. The second is an adversarial justification – portraying the other side as evil to justify action. This includes blames, accusations, defamation and stigmatization. Countries don't employ these kinds of messages when they want to prevent further escalation. The third type of argument is the diplomatic/realpolitik justification, which attempts to logically justify the actions taken – such as maintaining stability, leveraging an advantage or preventing future damage. Countries usually use it when they want to compensate for immoral actions – such as Israel's justification for not fully backing Ukraine in the recent war with Russia. This type of argument implies that a country has the correct solution to stabilize the region. Arguments that are not seen in the Gulf discourse are religious or traditional and personal justifications.

Arguments are often combined and not limited to one justification, but it is still possible to observe which country focuses more on which kind of narrative. The most recent case of violence in the Gulf was the Houthi drone attack on Abu Dhabi in January and February and the attack on a Saudi refinery in March. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are fighting on the same side, they have completely different narratives regarding the war in Yemen: Saudi Arabia focuses more on the adversarial argument against Iran, while the UAE focuses on a combination of moral and realpolitik arguments. Thus, UAE tends to highlight terms such as regional stability, norms of international peace and security, and (unnamed) terrorism; the audience for this type of messages was mostly the international community, and the identity of the enemy was blurred. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UAE pushed for the Houthis to be labeled a terrorist organization – which they achieved, at the cost of not condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Saudi media, meanwhile, highlighted the Iranian involvement behind the Houthi actions and highlighted the global condemnation of the attack. Messages to the international community tended to highlight the possible shortages in oil supply to the global market.

The importance of understanding these narratives is that it allows us to glimpse a broader picture of the event, and to anticipate the next stage in the campaign. For instance, UAE statements following the attack on Abu Dhabi that did not identify the adversary and highlighted the role of the international community, signaled that the UAE will not retaliate.

Dr. Mordechai Chaziza, a Lecturer at the Department of Politics and Government at Ashkelon Academic College, discussed Sino-GCC partnership in a new era of great power competition. In the Middle East, the United States has a responsibility to protect its friends and allies, whereas China is responsible for economic and technological aspects. The study explores how the GCC countries' inclusion in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is influenced by the new era of great power competition. An escalation in US-China

competition could lead GCC countries to reshape their alliances and coalitions in the region; reduce their diplomatic maneuvers; abandon neutrality, and possibly join one of the camps against the other. At the same time, Gulf monarchies continue to view their ties with Washington as a core pillar of their national security. They are determined to maintain their security partnership with the United States while strengthening their economic and technological ties with China, but great power competition complicates their position and pressures them to side with one of the two powers.

The BRI's scope covers more than 146 countries and 30 international organizations along six economic corridors, and includes both a land and a maritime component. The Gulf region serves as a vital geostrategic component of the BRI – the land route moves through Iran and the maritime route passes through the Persian Gulf. China and the GCC states have expressed intentions of cooperation between the BRI and their national developments plans; hence, the realization of the BRI requires China to engage and integrate with its Gulf partners in energy, economy and political matters of the success of the initiative.

Energy is at the heart of the Gulf states' integration in the BRI framework. GCC countries account for 30.5% of the world's oil resources and 19.8% of the world's natural gas resources. Over the last 24 years, China's oil imports from the Gulf region have increased in absolute value and in their share of China's total crude oil imports. In 2020, China imported \$78.8 billion worth of oil from Persian Gulf countries, accounting for 44.7% of its crude oil imports. Saudi Arabia alone provides 15.9% of China's annual oil imports. By 2030, China is foreseen to purchase 80% of the oil output of the Gulf States. The GCC oil-producing countries are therefore an essential partner in successfully implementing the BRI.

Trade and investment are the other pillar of Gulf States' integration in the BRI and have increased significantly in recent years. In 2020, China has replaced the EU as the GCC's largest trading partner, with an overall trade volume of approximately \$232.8 billion. Chinese investment and contracts have also increased significantly, to approximately \$75 billion by 2021.

In political terms, China seeks to be recognized as a great power, both domestically and internationally. The two sides' leaders have paid state visits to each other and GCC states have become frequent destinations for Chinese officials. China has also developed strategic partnerships with key GCC countries, whose support can bolster its great-power status and assist it in projecting influence into new geographic areas. Chinese strategy in the region is based on partnership diplomacy rather than alliances, such as the United States. China has signed strategic partnership agreements with the GCC countries, detailing significant economic investment and trade within the BRI framework. While China seeks to challenge US hegemony in the long term, it does not seek – nor is it likely – to replace the United States as the dominant security player in the Gulf region in the foreseeable future; instead, China is likely to maintain its self-interested policy of neutrality in the region.

China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships – its highest level of political engagement – with Saudi Arabia in 2016 and with the UAE in 2018. Strategic partnerships were established with Kuwait, Oman and Qatar.

In the context of global great power confrontation, the GCC countries will face a complex and delicate challenge to manage their relations with the US while integrating into the BRI framework. A choice between the United States and China would be costly for the Gulf monarchies, but they are not prepared to jeopardize their security cooperation with the United States. At the same time, they are interested in promoting economic cooperation with China, at all levels.

Mr. Yitzhak Gal, Research Fellow at Mitvim Institute, discussed economic relations between Israel and the UAE as a driver for regional economic cooperation. The Arab Middle East as a whole, excluding the Gulf Countries, are suffering from grave challenges that they are unlikely to be able to solve by themselves: their economy has rapidly growing needs in terms of jobs, housing etc., due to high population growth and to large numbers of young people with an academic education; most of them are suffering from 15 years of stagnation in economic growth per capita and exports; and economic insecurity and high unemployment are a constant problem. All of these factors taken together, represent latent social and political unrest that is waiting to erupt – the situation is in fact worse than it was in the days of the Arab Spring. On top of these long-term trends, in the last decade there are also mounting food and water insecurity and related challenges.

There are two actors in the region that have the capabilities to lead the required solution: Israel, on the one hand, and the GCC bloc – particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia – on the other. Cooperation between these parties is possibly the only way to overcome the challenges facing the Arab region. The Abraham Accords have created the political platform on which such regional cooperation initiatives could be developed.

This can be demonstrated by the trilateral Israel-UAE-Jordan agreement on water and renewable energies, which was signed last year. Israel has groundbreaking technologies, and unique capabilities in sewage recycling for irrigation and agriculture. The UAE has large companies with execution capabilities, and proven operational models of solar energy electricity. Jordan has large desert areas which could be used for such electricity production.

Dr. Scott Weiner, a Lecturer for Political Science at the George Washington University at Washington, DC, discussed tribes and the state in historical context: evidence from Kuwait and Oman. In November 2011, Kuwait's parliament was stormed by opposition MPs, made up of Islamists and tribal coalition members. In February 2012, Kuwait held parliamentary elections, but these were annulled by the country's supreme court. This created a crisis of confidence between Kuwait's royal family and members of the tribal Islamist opposition.

To bridge these tensions, the Kuwaiti Amir invited tribal leaders to a meeting in October 2012. Following this meeting, several of the tribal sheikhs issued declarations of support for the Amir and called on some of their members who were protesting to stand down.

Nearly ten years later, tribal politics continues to be dominant not only within Kuwait but throughout the Arab Gulf. In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, state-society relations are being consistently renegotiated, due both to lockdown and other health measures and to secondary economic effects faced by these countries. Better understanding the way in which tribal politics operate is important to understand how these societies operate or are likely to act in the future.

The research that is briefly summarized here is based on six months' field work in Kuwait and about a month in Oman, looking through British archives and conducting 52 semi-structured interviews in English and Arabic. The presentation will not focus on current events, but will provide a broader context for understanding them.

Scholarly approaches to tribes are essentially twofold: tribes as identity and tribes as a mechanism for obtaining access. Among others, tribes have been examined as electoral constituencies, patrimonial networks and corporate groups. However, it is also important to understand tribes in themselves and not by analogy to other entities. Poor definitions lead to poor policy analysis.

This study examines tribes as an authoritative kinship group. Kinship is visible and "super sticky." A visible identity is one that can be easily observed and detected – in the Middle East, this includes lineage, which is included in people's names. A sticky attribute is one that is difficult to change – such as skin color, for instance. Kinship is sticky in the sense that there is a pervasive belief that person A and B are connected due to (supposed) shared family ties. Unlike most identities, that define a person as belonging either to an in-group or to an out-group, kinship is "super sticky" – it goes a step further in also assigning to individuals a specific position within the in-group. In the Gulf context, where groups compete for limited resources, knowing who is and is not part of your group is particularly valuable.

Tribes' influence on politics varies by states. In some states, kinship exists almost completely separately from the states and performs functions that would usually be considered as belonging to the state. This is a result of competitive access between tribes to resources before state-building. When the state reached out to these tribes as part of state-building, it reached out to them individually, which consolidated the position of tribes as governing within the state. In contrast, in other cases, tribes cooperated for access to resources before state-building, and formed what can be called proto-bureaucracies to help manage the affairs between them. During state-building, these proto-bureaucracies were subsumed into the state apparatus, and kinship and tribes have thereby become instrumentalized.

Kuwait is a case of competitive access, where tribes had different areas, each with its own wells. There were ad-hoc arrangements to mitigate conflict, but no standing arrangements to manage conflicts over water resources. When the Kuwaiti state was built in the 1950s and 1960s, they had to reach out to different tribes individually to incorporate them into the state; despite attempts by the state, tribes segregated themselves within mixed cities. In Oman, tribes were partially or fully settled and water access came through a series of canals used for different functions. There was a need to negotiate the working and use of the canals, which led to the formation of proto-bureaucracies. When the Omani state was forming, these proto-bureaucracies were simply incorporated into the state as part of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources.

Diplomatic outreach to Gulf States, as was done through the Abraham Accords, is an important first step in the region; however, as these ties develop further, it will become increasingly important to understand the society in these countries and its workings, of which tribes are a fundamental component.

Concluding Remarks

Prof. Shaul Chorev said that there are many unknowns when discussing the future of the region, especially with the added unpredictability brought about by the Russia-Ukraine war, but the conclusions of this conference could provide additional areas for research. Other unknowns are the future of the nuclear deal with Iran, and the US response if a deal is not reached; Saudi Arabia's possible participation in the Abraham Accords; and the Palestinian issue, which is mentioned consistently by Gulf representatives.

Prof. Chorev thanked Mr. Grinberg and Dr. Rubinovitz for organizing and orchestrating the conference and its fascinating agenda; and Ms. Zehavit Salman Meir and Ms. Orit Schwartz for the administrative work in preparation for the conference. Prof. Chorev promised the Ezri family that the Center will continue to hold such conferences.