



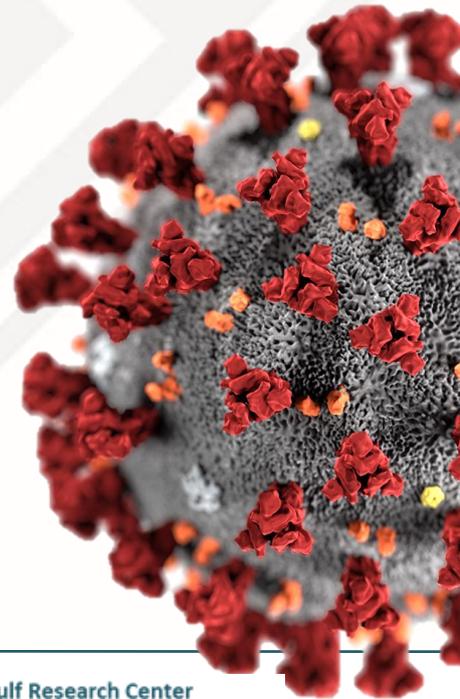
مركز الخليج للأبحاث
Gulf Research Center

Digital Roundtable on
The Gulf Security post
COVID-19

Organized by
Gulf Research Center

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Summary of Discussions



Gulf Research Center Foundation

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Fax: +41227162739
Email: Info@grc.net

**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110
Email: Info@grc.net

**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah**

19 Rayat Al-Itihad St.
P.O. Box 2134 Jeddah 21451
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Phone: +966-12-6511999
Fax: +966-2-653-0953
Email: Info@grc.net

For more information:
www.grc.net



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Part 1: The pandemic caused a shift in state security priorities. Will this lead to a relaxation of global priorities for counter-terrorism?

The discussions on the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global counterterrorism policies highlighted pre-existing trends on the importance of reprioritizing counterterrorism strategies of the United States and its allies.

First, the three major ways that United States invests in counterterrorism measures were identified:

1. **Time:** It was predicted that the US will likely decrease the time it allocates to counterterrorism within US national security establishments post-COVID-19
2. **Money:** It was predicted that there will be a downgrade of monetary investment post COVID-19 in terms of US counterterrorism efforts
3. **Assistance to regional authorities:** Capacity building assistance to the Gulf regional authorities for counterterrorism is robust and will not likely change after the pandemic

It was noted that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a realization in the US security establishments that there has been an oversized investment in counterterrorism at the expense of a focus on great power rivalry (i.e. China and Russia). Post COVID-19 there will likely be a rise in the US focus on the role of Russia and China and their presence in the international arena.

Challenge for the Gulf: In the last 20 years, there have been close national security relations between the US and the Gulf, with the US putting a strong emphasis on counterterrorism, and the Gulf countries might have a difficult time dealing with a US shift in priorities. These countries may endure tough cooperation with the US which will now have a firm position towards China in a 'new era' after the coronavirus pandemic. The US will expect their Gulf allies to support any US policies against China.

Finally, one of the key issues in the future of counterterrorism policies across the Gulf region will be the development of new tools of biological warfare.



Part 2: The pandemic had significant negative repercussions for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Could the Iranian regime face a popular uprising, more serious than before?

Triple shock of the crisis in Iran:

1. COVID-19 epicenter
2. Decline in oil prices
3. Sanctions

Iran was slow to respond to COVID-19 due to internal political issues. For example, Iranian leaders were reluctant to delay elections as they were initially worried about accusations of illegitimacy by the international community. One of the main issues that has been embedded in Iran's structural leadership is on the matter of elite politicking inside Iran. Iran has now passed the peak of COVID-19 and has begun to reopen.

Internal conflicts among ruling elite

It was discussed how the various camps among the Iranian elite are not cooperating effectively and individuals (both moderates and hardliners) are using the current crisis as an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves within different constituencies to develop effective policies. One of the main points highlighted was the political use of COVID-19 by Iranian political establishments to reclaim some form of lost legitimacy. President Hassan Rouhani pushed for an increased economic response by shutting down cities and by highlighting the gravity of COVID-19's effects on the Iranian economy. Iran has been attempting to sell privatized assets and 10% of pension funds because of the impact of sanctions, inability to access foreign reserves and the decline of oil revenue. There was \$10 billion expected in oil revenue prior to the crisis which is now lost. Iran continues to pay salaries, but there is a big question in terms of how the Iranian leadership will move forward.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) uses the crisis to its advantage

The IRGC has taken advantage of the current crisis in order to question President Rouhani's credibility and management and highlight the misappropriation of \$5 billion funds that have gone missing. As an institution, it has become increasingly visible throughout the crisis by cleaning streets and mosques throughout Iran, which has demonstrated effective governance



mechanisms to the Iranian public. It has used this as political propaganda to rehabilitate its image from much criticism not only regionally, but also to the international community.

In conclusion, it was argued that due to the current crisis, there are limited alternatives to challenge the Iranian political establishment, and therefore it is unlikely that this will be the crisis to “break Iran” or that increased unrest/protests will occur. On the contrary, COVID-19 has been an opportunity to allow Tehran to place blame on the international community and especially the Trump Administration, in addition to putting pressure on other countries to come to its aid. This has worked favorably in that there has indeed been a humanitarian assistance lobby created for Iran. Strategically, Iran can continue to use sanctions as an excuse for any of its shortcomings in handling the crisis.

Part 3: The pandemic coupled with the collapse of oil prices caused major economic and financial hurdles for the Gulf States’ armament policies, and arms deals already agreed.

Discussions indicated that the US will increasingly focus on building defense infrastructure to compete with Russia and China, i.e. long range strikes, project force rapidly and heavy forces. It has been sacrificing this capacity for the last 20 years focusing on counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East. This is part of the new Marine Corps concept, which is focused on fighting in the Pacific. This will have an effect on defense procurement overall. Another evolving issue is how the Gulf will be able to fulfil its arms deal commitments with the US moving forward into the crisis.

Two types of American presence in the Middle East:

1. **Expeditionary war fighting presence** (the Iraq War as an example): This is what the public focuses on but it is not as significant in the grand scheme of things
2. **Long term training assistance/acclturation of Gulf military forces** to professionalize forces and make them compatible with the US. This presence is more significant and yet more affected by COVID-19 as it involves direct human to human contact. The problem lies in the long-term impact of COVID-19, as these training assistance programs will remain halted. These facilities have undergone a complete lockdown in



an airbase on the outskirts of Riyadh to decrease the risk of disease transmission.

Worst case scenario: US retreats entirely from the region. Even in this case, the US will likely continue to support the Kurdish regional government, regardless of who wins the US 2020 election.

Gulf weapons spending moving forward

It was argued that discretionary expenditures of Gulf States will be affected, and this includes defense spending. Some broad acquisition programs could be affected, however air defense (ballistic missile protection) is the least likely to be affected due to the high global demand in this technology, but if payments are missed, Gulf countries' acquisition could be delayed up to five years. **Naval forces will become less of a priority due to 3 reasons:**

1. They have the least important role in regime protection.
2. Higher supply than demand globally (can acquire later as needed).
3. Naval forces are already robust and have the ability to expand rapidly.

Part 4: The pandemic could increasingly lead to a shift in US security priorities worldwide. A US confrontation with China is not only possible but probable. Will this lead to a relaxation of US security priorities concerning the Gulf region?

US security priorities in the Gulf

Three categories of risk factors were put forward:

1. Known knowns:
 - US will likely withdraw from Afghanistan
 - US strategic dialogue with Iraq
 - US withdrawal from Syria

Result: While the US is expected to withdraw from conflicts in the region, there are more troops in the Gulf than ever before including in Saudi Arabia. Therefore the US is ironically more engaged than ever.

2. Known unknowns:
 - US has turned inward in terms of dealing with COVID-19 and is restarting its economy. It is uncertain how this will play out



considering the upcoming November presidential election. If Biden wins, there could be a potential revival of the Iran nuclear agreement.

3. Unknown unknowns:

- The pandemic itself and how it will continue to play out over the next year.
- Now that the US and Saudi are increasingly competitors in the oil industry, how will the US-Saudi relationship be impacted?

Increased US focus on pandemic prevention and response

Discussions highlighted how the ongoing pandemic has created security challenges for the US, and for this reason US leadership will increasingly focus funding in the area of pandemic prevention and response. The Department of Defense will redeploy U.S. military personnel to support the domestic challenges of the COVID-19 emergency response. In other US budgets, funding and manpower will increasingly focus on scientific innovation and methodology to prevent future pandemics.

Tensions between US and China

The US has accused Beijing of exploiting the pandemic to continue its posturing in the South China Sea and utilizing soft power through provisions of medical aid to the international community while campaigning misinformation. Phase 1 of the China and U.S trade deals has completed, and as part of the agreement China signed to purchase agricultural goods and energy products from the U.S. totaling approximately \$200 billion. However, there is a clause in the trade deal indicating that in the event of a national disaster or unforeseeable event, China would be able to back away from the trade deal agreement. This potential for China to abandon the deal is a potential disaster for the US.

Contrary to some predications put forward early on in the discussion, it was argued that US security priorities in the Gulf will not be affected by the current crisis, due to the following:

- US will continue to prioritize the fight against violent extremism (albeit with some more focus on pandemic response).
- US will want to maintain the security of international shipping lanes.
- US will continue to build regional counterterrorism capacity to allow Gulf countries to defend themselves.
- Countering the Iran threat will remain a priority.



- US will continue to support economic reform initiatives by partner governments in the Gulf.

However, it was emphasized that the US will need to see value in continuing its commitment to its partners in the Gulf, looking at its assistance through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis.