



## A Workshop on

# “The Role of The Gulf States in The Ongoing- Conflict in Syria”

Saturday and Sunday 18-19 September 2021.

## Executive Summary



In a joint collaboration Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies and the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University held a virtual workshop entitled “**The Role of Gulf States in The Ongoing Conflict in Syria**”, on Saturday and Sunday 18-19 September 2021.

Researchers and academics from the Gulf states, Turkey, Iran, Russia, Germany, France, China, Britain and the United States participated in the workshop where they thoroughly discussed the positions of the Gulf states (the GCC and Iraq and Yemen) on the conflict in Syria.

The workshop focused on breaking down the roles and stances of these countries in accordance with the transforming scenes of the conflict in Syria and the stages it went through in relation to the characteristics of each stage, the factors of the shifting roles for each country, and the analysis of the current position on the ongoing conflict. In addition to the potential for these countries roles in pushing for an imminent political solution, along with the expectations for the development of these roles in connection with the developments of the situation in Syria. Hence, we hereby present a summary of the opinions, views and ideas provided by the participants in the workshop.

## **1. Characteristics and risks of the current situation of the conflict in Syria:**

Since the Putin-Erdogan summit, March 2020, the level of violence has decreased, where the military frontlines in northern Syria have frozen; in light of the continuation of military presence of the four prominent forces in the Syria, namely America, Russia, Turkey and Iran. Thus, the international stance has become lukewarm towards the conflict in Syria; with evident gradual decline towards the interest in a political solution, while interest in this issue is seen merely through a humanitarian and relief perspective. In effect, Syria remained divided into four spheres of influence, administered by four governments, namely the regime government in Damascus, the south,



the center and the coast; the Autonomous Administration government (controlled by the Kurdish BYD forces) in the north and east of the country; the Salvation Government in Idlib, which is affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; and the Syrian Interim Government in the three regions in the north, the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring regions. Eventually, it is feared that the state of division in the spheres of influence in Syria will continue to become permanent, as the reconstruction processes in the current situation reinforces such a state of division; prolonging the war will inevitably lead to instability in the region, as no political solution can succeed unless based on UNSCR 2254, that should lead to a political transition and a (TGB) Transitional Governing Body, leading to free and fair elections. Meanwhile, the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime, without a durable political solution, risks the continuation of the volatile situation, as it does not allow the safe return of refugees and displaced persons to their native areas.

On the other hand, and in the majority of such influence spheres, people's living conditions are poorly harsh, especially in the regime-controlled areas, as they are the worst, where after more than a decade of war they are literally on the brink of collapse, knowing that the foreseeable future may simply be of a graver seriousness, after all local Syrian capabilities have been exhausted. These conditions are reflected in the form of mass emigration, especially of those with higher education and professional capacities. Given the fact that Syria's population today is about 26 million, according to recent estimates about 10 million of them are outside Syria, as a result of forced emigration and displacement, and the rest, about 16 millions, are distributed as follows: approximately 4.7 northwestern Syria belong to the Syrian opposition, with Turkey behind it, including the areas controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib; and about 9.4 in the regime's areas, with Iran and Russia behind it; And about 3 million in the areas of the "Syrian Democratic Forces", with America behind them. More than 11 years after the start of the revolution there exists a generation of young people who have lived their whole lives in a state of instability, as the refugee card has become an



area of political bargaining among several parties, such as Turkey and the European Union, the Turkish government and opposition, the regime and the opposition in Syria. In the aftermath of 2015, Gulf humanitarian aid began to go entirely to the United Nations, in order to evade the suspicion of terrorism, and here lies a new Achilles heel, for the work of the United Nations in fragile countries is very problematic, as it makes humanitarian aid subject to a political decision.

## 2. The positions of other countries vis-à-vis the foreseeable role of the Gulf States

As per the participants, the significance of the Gulf role stems from several tracks: Promoting the political transition process in accordance with Security Council resolutions, in addition to preserving Syria's unity and stability, continuing to provide humanitarian support to the Syrians and coordinating efforts with Turkey within this framework; finally, benefiting from the inner Gulf reconciliation, which may have positive results on the Syrian issue, given that there are great overlaps between the aspirations of the Syrians and the goals of the Gulf states, to oppose Iranian subversive plans and to combat terrorism and extremism.

As for the future, the participants underlined the positive role the Gulf states can play in Syria, by enabling political stability and providing more support at the humanitarian level, in addition to the important economic role they states may undertake in rebuilding Syria, along with providing financial grants for reconstruction projects.

This is within the general framework. **As for the position of the United States of America**, it merely views the Syrian issue, at least for now, from a humanitarian perspective, as America's current focus is narrow and confined to fighting ISIS, reducing tension between Turkey and the Kurds in northeastern Syria, in addition to not opening the reconstruction file without



a political solution. And if some regional countries, or one of the Gulf states try to breach this issue and approach the reconstruction file, there will be mounting pressure on them by the current US administration.

**As for the Russian position**, as echoed by one of the participants from Russia, both Russia and the Gulf states do have an interest in preserving the territorial integrity of Syria, and both are against any division or partition of Syria, as both seek to achieve political stability. Nevertheless, there are several differences between Russia and the Gulf states, most notably the role of Bashar al-Assad. As a matter of fact, for most Gulf countries, any operation in Syria should not involve Assad. As for Moscow, this is not the only way out, as Moscow believes there is no alternative to Assad that can be offered. Moreover, there is also another dispute between Russia and the Gulf states related to Iran. The perception among the Gulf states is that Iran and its militias must leave Syria, as its presence may harm many issues; hence, it must be removed from the political scene in Syria for the benefit of the Syrian people. While Russia's position towards Iran is different, as it sees that Iran has legitimate interests in Syria, given the historical relations, so it is better for Iran to be part of the equation as opposed to not. Russia can play a role in the dialogue between the Syrian regime and the opposition, as happened in Daraa recently, in order to push for a political solution that preserves the unity of Syria and its territories, and guarantees the return of refugees.

In fact, Turkey's interest in the Syrian issue follows four destinations: First, to ensure that there is no intra-borders transnational entity led by Kurdish forces; secondly, to ensure that the conflict in Idlib is defused, so that the area is safe; and thirdly, ensuring that there is no wave of displaced persons towards its areas of control or a new wave of refugees towards its territories; finally, the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2254, ensuring stability and peace in Syria, and reaching a dialogue between the opposition and the Syrian regime.



**As for the Iranian position**, it was crystal-clear to support the Assad regime and to prevent it from being toppled, as the Iranians consider the Arab Spring revolutions part of the American scheme to change the political regimes in the region. Following Rouhani's accession to the presidency in 2013, the position of the Rouhani administration was more supportive of Iranian engagement in Syria to support Assad and to save the Syrian regime; especially in light of the support provided by some Gulf states to the Syrian revolution. The new Iranian president is not expected to change Iran's policy toward Syria.

Unanimously, the **French, British and German** positions agree on a political solution in Syria, in accordance with Security Council resolutions, and on the non-normalization with the Syrian regime without a political solution. The same applies to reconstruction; there will be no reconstruction without achieving a lasting, genuine political solution. These three countries, however, are now viewing the Syrian issue from the angle of providing humanitarian and relief aid, fighting terrorism and putting an end to mass waves of migration and asylum.

At first, **China** only used its veto against any resolution condemning the Syrian regime in the Security Council, for fear of repeating the Libyan scenario. In the period between 2012 and 2018, China focused on supporting a political solution, whether with the Syrian government or with the Syrian opposition, as it received four delegations from the opposition during these years, where in 2016 China appointed a Special Envoy for Syria. Since 2018, China has begun to think about contributing to the reconstruction, where more than 30 Chinese companies have visited Syria in an attempt to seek new opportunities. Clearly, China views Syria as part of the land and sea Silk Road. Furthermore, China is also focused on fighting terrorism in Syria, as this does not only apply to ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Terrorism affects China, despite Syria's geographical distance from China.



### 3. The Gulf states policies towards the Syrian issue and the factors that would alter such policies:

Having lost any hope of reform to be taken by Bashar al-Assad, the Gulf states became involved in the Syrian conflict in Syria where they had an active role in the period between 2011 and 2015. However, this role has evidently declined after the involvement of Russia, amid complete Arab and international silence. When the Gulf disputes surfaced in 2014 and exploded in 2017; although the Gulf states have had winning cards and capabilities that qualify them to play a highly significant role in pushing for a political solution in Syria, they did not, due to internal and economic challenges. What weakens the role of the Gulf states in the Syrian file is the absence of a unified Gulf position, the absence of a unified Gulf strategy to deal with any external issues, as well as the divergence in positions on Iran and its interventions in the region.

The Gulf states did not use their relations with Russia to pressure it regarding the Syrian issue. On the contrary, they developed their relations with Russia, since its intervention in Syria in 2015. Some Gulf states leaders believe that opening up to the Syrian regime contributes to mitigating Iranian influence, but this belief has been proven wrong.

As for the **Saudi position**, Riyadh has been keen from the start to not let the situation in Syria slide toward violence, given the distinctive relationship between King Abdullah and Bashar al-Assad. Hence, The Kingdom initially offered \$350 million to improve the conditions of the Syrian people, then put forward an initiative similar to the Yemeni model, but the regime's intransigence prevented this, where the regime continued its systematic killings. Still, Saudi Arabia does not appear to be a player with a great influence in the Syrian file, as it is completely over occupied today, financially, morally, in the media, and in Yemen. However, it remains committed to several points, the first of which is the unity of Syria and the absence of a federal or sectarian model in the country, the second of which is Syrian Arabism, and the third is the thorny controversy of Assad; where a distinction must



be made between the regime and the state, to prevent a repetition of the Iraqi model. The Saudi position remains firm regarding the political solution based on Resolution 2254 and the Geneva 1 Communique, while emphasizing that Iran still poses a threat to Syria and its identity.

As for **Qatar's** position, it was clear in supporting the aspirations of the Syrian people, but this role witnessed a decline after the 2014 crisis and the withdrawal of ambassadors, then its explosion in 2017, as the focus was directed to relief and humanitarian support, with the retreat of the forces of the revolution militarily and on the ground. The dispersion of the opposition forces played a role in directing support to the various forces and factions. The Qatari role is currently focused on supporting the stability of the liberated areas in the north, pending progress in the political process.

**Kuwait** had a similar stance to that of other Gulf states. In fact, it saw at the beginning of what happened in Syria an opportunity to limit Iranian influence in the region. Kuwait still calls its relations with the Syrian regime (freezing of relations), not severing relations, as Kuwait is witnessing a state of division regarding the Syrian issue, on a sectarian basis (Sunni and Shiite), for this reason, Kuwait was cautiously dealing with the Syrian file, and was abiding by the resolutions issued by the Arab League and the United Nations. The main dynamics of Kuwaiti policy toward Syria can be categorized as follows: the Sunni Islamic identity of Kuwait, the presence of the Shiite component, Kuwait's support for the Gulf states and its close relationship with America, along with the fear of Iran and its interventions. Kuwait has not yet taken any step in the domain of restoring relations with the Syrian regime, as it is currently rejecting the issue of recognizing "Bashar al-Assad" as a legitimate president, and it seeks relative neutrality in many regional issues.

As for the **Sultanate of Oman**, its policy towards Syria has went through three stages: the stage of anticipation and waiting; not taking explicit, declared measures, rather taking a neutral position, the stage of relative closeness to the Syrian regime, which lasted for several years, and the last stage





of silent support for the Syrian regime. The Sultanate tends to reconcile with regional issues, and avoid conflict.

As for the **UAE**, it initially adopted the Gulf position in support of the movement in Syria until 2013, but with the rise of Islamic discourse in Syria and its confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, it turned to retreat and confront the Islamic movements in the region. Today, the UAE is occupied with more than one front, while the UAE's tendency was clear to normalize with the Syrian regime, and thus the UAE reached the point of no return on this path.

Finally, **Iraq**. There is no independent Iraqi policy, and the position is divided towards Syria. Each of the two sides of the division is subordinate to one of the parties of the regional conflict. There was no cordiality between Iraq and Syria in the aftermath of the American invasion and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The radical transformation towards the 2011 Syrian revolution occurred through a position taken by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to stand with the Syrian regime, and Iraq was part of the Iranian decision to defend the Syrian regime, and part of the militias that receive their commands from Iran.

#### **4. The potential capabilities of the Gulf states to impact the Syrian file today**

The Gulf states have distanced themselves from the Syrian issue, giving way to Iran, Turkey, Russia and America, to the extent that some believe there is no real role for the Gulf states in Syria, at least for the time being. Despite this, the international role of the Gulf states remains evident as it cannot be overlooked by anyone. It remains influential through the network of relations of each state, and through the network of internal relations of such states, as a result of their political and economic weight. These states do enjoy pivotal relations with the centers of world powers, the permanent



members of the Security Council, and the European countries, as this allows them to play a key role in the region's crises, including the Syrian crisis, to push for a just political solution that contributes to alleviating the suffering of the Syrians and the resulting effects in the neighboring countries and the entire region. There may be stronger relations with Turkey, regarding Syria, because of its winning cards in Syrian affairs, such as its areas of influence in northern Syria, and its hosting of millions of refugees on its soil.

On the other hand, the Gulf states are facing internal problems, and economic and financial challenges, and therefore it is not possible to rely much on them in the future. Still, it is possible for the Gulf states to contribute and help, but there must be a proper environment and international support for their role, admitting that Syria needs this Gulf role. However, any distorted political settlement in Syria that does not take into account the will of the Syrian people, who demanded change, will not serve stability in the region.

Some Gulf states can play an influential role in the future to fill the void of the Arab role, and the Gulf-Qatari-Saudi reconciliation can be relied upon, because it opened the door to the possibility of an understanding between Riyadh and Doha, to spur a unified Arab position. The Inner-Gulf reconciliation, and the Gulf-Turkish reconciliation, can create a new atmosphere and be positively reflected in the Syrian file, through the relations of these countries and the tools they possess, especially if there is a minimum level of understanding towards the crisis in Syria, where they can play an important role in the fight against terrorism, whether from Iranian or jihadist militias and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYJ) militia, as well as in combating drugs.

The GCC countries can play a role in pushing for the resumption of efforts for a political solution, through their international relations, and pushing for the Syrian opposition to adopt a unified vision towards the political process, along with pushing to stop normalization with the Syrian regime and confront its return to the Arab League before achieving a political transition.



There are differences in vision between Russia and the Gulf states over several issues, such as the role of Assad and the rehabilitation of his regime, the role of Iran and the role of the opposition. Moscow sees itself playing the role of mediator, and that Iran has legitimate interests in Syria. It is better for Iran to be an important part of any agreement to achieve peace and stability in Syria. It considers that the Russian intervention in Syria is limited, and its cost can be borne, and it can maintain its air forces in Syria for years to come, because there are no large human losses, nor financial costs for its forces. This situation may change if there is significant opposition from the Syrian people, as this may change the calculations in Moscow.

The GCC countries can take advantage of their good economic relations with Russia, to convince it that the continuation of the current situation is a loss for Russia. Change in Syria requires a smart dialogue with Russia, in order to be convinced of a political solution that meets the aspirations of the Syrian people, safeguards the institutions of the Syrian state, preserves Syria's unity, and at the same time maintains Russia's interests in Syria, within the limits of respect for national sovereignty.

Saudi Arabia may join the Russian-Qatari-Turkish meeting, and this may contribute to exerting pressure on America and its negative position in Syria, as this constitutes a push towards a solution in Syria.

Nonetheless, the GCC countries can contribute to a solution in Syria, in coordination with Turkey on several tracks, including humanitarian support in the opposition areas in the north, international pressure not to allow the return of refugees to regime areas before a political solution is achieved, and support for the Turkish position, which is struggling internationally against re-floating the regime. Arab cooperation with Turkey is the guarantor to support the Arab role, and in any case, confronting the Iranian project in the region starts from Syria, as this is a Syrian, regional and international affair, but it turns into a Gulf necessity, given the Iranian subversive role in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The Yemen war, no doubt, is one of the manifestations of the Iranian role, and it is a proxy war against Saudi Arabia.



Any solution based on a political transition requires an American-Russian-Turkish consensus, and it is expected that Iran will have an opposition and obstruction role, but if there is a tripartite consensus, it will be difficult for Iran to obstruct it. At the same time, some of Iran's interests can be taken into account within the logical limits, as one of the regional powers, but the most important thing for the success of any solution is the consensus among the Syrians on the controversial issues.

The areas outside the control of the Syrian regime have very great potential, and the needs there are very huge, but Gulf support needs more effective mechanisms of rely on the Syrian society. The development of the northern Syrian regions enhances the self-productive capacity, reducing dependence on relief aid and enhancing the culture of work. Opening the GCC labor market to Syrian workers, which has proven to be effective and successful employment in the countries of asylum, is an appropriate form of helping large numbers of Syrians by providing job opportunities for Syrians, thus reducing the need for humanitarian aid.

There is a need for an active Gulf role, with regard to the humanitarian issue at least. People inside Syria need not only humanitarian aid (relief basket) but also the creation of a proper environment, so that they can build their economy and provide their own income.

There are pioneering experiences of some Gulf states in the field of humanitarian work, such as Kuwait and Qatar, and this applies to their future role in reconstruction. Perhaps this role will be largely activated by focusing on the education sector first in northern Syria, and then moving to other regions, and finding an appropriate mechanism to deliver aid to those who deserve it.

Efforts to push for a political solution in Syria require the emergence of a Syrian opposition party, which has a road map and the formulation of a consensual viewpoint, to which political support is directed from various parties. Without it, external parties will not be able to provide useful support.



At the end of the day, the GCC states have a role in the Syrian conflict. The foreign aid from the Gulf states during the upcoming reconstruction period is a major source and an essential tool for achieving stability in the country. Thus, this aid can include different forms and terms, depending on the political interest or priorities that all Gulf states want. However, the Gulf countries, as donor countries, have limited experience, especially in the issue of reconstruction. Even large countries that have a long history of financing reconstruction may fail in many cases to achieve the goal of reconstruction. The Gulf countries must study their role in reconstruction aid, and that the goal of the strategy is to achieve positive results for the beneficiary countries and the people of these countries, and to increase their effectiveness as donor aides.

However, the reconstruction work within the status quo, as Syria divided into spheres of influence, reinforces the division of Syria, and the issue of reconstruction remains linked to a political solution based on a genuine political transition. Gulf states can contribute significantly by refusing to provide reconstruction funds, unless a political transition is achieved. This is the position that the United States, the European Union and other countries insist on, and it is better for the Gulf countries to apply in their activities, in the event of reconstruction in Syria and other countries, an organized and unified strategy based on three axes, far from the personal and strategic interests of each country, and to include a results-based approach, interaction with decision-makers internally or externally, and permanent coordination between the Gulf states, as donors, with international organizations, foreign countries and the recipient country that receives aid.

To sum up, there is a need to discuss the future role of the Gulf in pushing for a just political solution in Syria, despite the current differences in the positions of its countries, and formulating an objective policy within a minimum of common understanding between the Gulf countries regarding the Syrian issue, after analyzing the dimensions of this conflict; in order to take advantage of the positive atmosphere among the Gulf countries.