Strategic Studies Summit

NESA Region in 2020

March 31 to April 03, 2016

Ankara, Turkey

Final Report
The Strategic Studies Network (SSN) is a partnership of over seventy institutions dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of politics, natural resources, economics, diplomacy, and military power. In order to help develop regional solutions to regional problems, the goal of the SSN is to encourage think tanks in developing policy-relevant research with frank and informed dialogue on security challenges facing the region.

The 2016 Strategic Studies Summit was held in Ankara, Turkey from 31 March to 03 April 2016. The Summit was hosted by the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies in partnership with the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM). The Summit brought together 133 participants from 77 different organizations across 35 countries—spanning North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe.

Entitled, “The NESA Region in 2020,” the Summit focused on identifying pressing security concerns in the NESA region and analyzing strategic changes that will shape the future of the region.

Through a combination of plenary and working group sessions, the Summit provided multiple avenues for the exchange of ideas within the policy and academic communities. Over the course of two days, the conference explored the changing nature of the global political and economic system and the need for collective action articulated in a broad regional and global strategy to tackle shared security challenges.

Our ongoing efforts at greater inclusion of all voices from across the region are aimed at developing concrete recommendations to address critical issues from diverse regional perspectives. This requires a great deal of hard work and commitment from all institutions involved and it has been inspiring to witness the increasing accomplishments of the SSN over the past several years. We would like to thank all participants for all their hard work at this year’s Summit.

We would like to offer special thanks to our co-sponsor, the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), and its President, Dr. Saban Kardas. We would also like to extend our deepest gratitude to the Turkish Prime Ministry’s External Relations Department for its very generous support of this year’s Summit.
The Summit was kicked off with a welcome reception and dinner hosted by the NESA Center on the evening of March 31, with opening remarks from the NESA Academic Dean, Dr. Roger Kangas, and the ORSAM Director, Dr. Saban Kardas. During the welcome dinner, Amb. Altay Cengizer, Director General for Policy Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs—Turkey, presented his thoughts on Turkish foreign policy and U.S.—Turkish relations.

On the morning of April 01, the opening plenary on “Global Powers and the International Setting” included remarks from Dr. Vadim Kozyulin, Russian Center for Policy Studies (PIR Center); Prof. Steven Blockmans, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS); Dr. Chen Yiyi, Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Dr. Saban Kardas, Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM); and Dr. Richard Russell, Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies. The speakers covered a variety of topics, including counterterrorism, energy, migration, and nuclear proliferation. The presentations highlighted the complexity of the role that foreign powers play and the intense competition between them. The session was followed by a lively question-and-answer session.

Following the opening plenary, three more plenaries were convened; five sub-regional working groups also began their deliberations over the course of the next three days, covering: (1) North Africa, (2) the Levant, (3) the Gulf, (4) Central Asia, and (5) South Asia.

On the evening of April 01, ORSAM hosted a cultural excursion to the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations and Ankara Castle, followed by a dinner in downtown Ankara.
On the afternoon of April 01, the second plenary focused on “Refugees and Migration Trends.” Panelists included Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS); Mr. Moussa Bourekba, CIDOB - Barcelona Centre for International Affairs; Mr. Hamza Shareef Hasan Al-Jubouri, Al-Nahrain Center for Strategic Studies; Mr. Xavier Aragall, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed); and Prof. Basak Yavcan, TOBB University of Economics and Technology. The speakers underscored the human tragedy triggered by the civil war in Syria and other regional conflicts. They also pointed out the high price that neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon are paying. Some speakers called on the United States, Europe, and regional oil-producing countries to shoulder responsibility for the refugee crisis.

On the afternoon of April 02, the third plenary was convened on “ISIS and Radicalism in the NESA Region.” Researchers from Afghanistan (Mr. Halimullah Kousary, Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS)); Bangladesh, (Mr. Shahab Enam Khan, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)); Jordan (Maj. Gen. Mohammad Farghal, Center for Strategic Studies – KAADS); and Turkey (Ms. Fatma Ceren Yazgan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), discussed the roots of extremism in their respective countries. They agreed that all religions experience some form of radicalization. They also agreed on the need for more cooperation between all countries to contain and defeat ISIS and other extremist groups.
On the morning of April 03, the fourth plenary focused on the “Emerging Economic Landscape in the NESA Region.” Special attention was given to the key changes in the global energy markets, where the collapse of oil prices since June 2014 has impacted economic development in many countries. Researchers from Bangladesh (Mr. Parvez Abbasi, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)); Jordan (Amb. Fadi Farasin, Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) - Turkey); Kyrgyzstan (Mr. Ermek Niyazov, Bank of Asia); and the United States (Dr. Gawdat Bahgat, Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies), discussed the impact of the global recession, low oil prices, and demographic shifts on their respective countries and regions. They emphasized the need for structural reform and broad economic diversification. They also called for empowering the private sector, encouraging foreign investment, and reducing the role of the state in the economic system.

As the conference came to a conclusion on the afternoon of April 03, a final plenary session was held to give an outlet to any final thoughts and included farewell remarks from Dr. Saban Kardas, Dr. Gawdat Bahgat, and Dr. Roger Kangas (pictured below).
North Africa and the Levant

Chaired by Prof. Anne Moisan of the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies, the North Africa working group consisted of participants from Cyprus, Egypt, France, Jordan, Libya, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United States.

On April 01, the North Africa and Levant working groups met together. On April 02 and 03, the two working groups met separately to focus on issues specific to each sub-region.

Within both the joint and separate sessions, topics included, but were not limited to, Daesh in the Levant and its affiliates in North Africa; how to best prevent and deal with radicalization; the flow of fighters to Syria; programs dealing with retuning fighters; government and civil societal efforts and programs; tailored actions and programs in North Africa; cross-border cooperation and collaboration; best business practices; and the vision of the region in 2020 and beyond.

The North Africa group devised a set of 30 specific policy recommendations, per the following:

1. Establish a regional framework of cooperation with countries of the region and the international community to address the threat of racialization and returnees.

2. Include civil society, think tanks, and NGOs/NGIs (including youth NGOs) in a comprehensive national dialogue and problem-solving task forces.

3. Create a combination of soft and hard approaches to deal with returnees – seriously examine initiatives, programs, and best practices and tailor these to the local context.

4. Create an “alternative” message to Daesh’s appeal to youth; using “at risk” youth or returnees.

5. Pool resources in training Imams in the various countries, as well as providing “religious experts” to rehabilitation centers.

6. Create/expand online religious training sites for the general public, but also tailored to youth.

7. Establish partnerships between government, civil society, and private business as part of creating programs to deal with victims of terrorist attacks that also includes returnees.

8. Use returnees and their contacts/intel to establish community outreach programs to susceptible youth.

9. Establish local community “volunteer “groups with returnees and local unemployed youth, organized by retirees, to lead community service outreach programs into disadvantaged and susceptible communities.

10. Create a government Strategic Communications Plan to promote the “new [fill in the country]” citizen and flood the airways, print, billboards, etc.—the focus should be credible, positive, hopeful and informative, and especially focused on youth.
11. Establish a “new government social contract” with youth and disenfranchised groups that focuses on “trust” and makes them proud to be a citizen.

12. Do not use terrorism as an excuse to delay or slow reform efforts. The international community should keep the pressure on countries to continue down the path of reform even as they are dealing with the immediate security threat of terrorism.

13. Participants and think tanks should use their “circle of influence” and the Strategic Studies Network (SSN) to promote ideas from this working group and other meetings like this by advocating new ideas and approaches.

14. Establish a “media blitz” to inform the public of new government programs aimed at controlling the borders, preventing radicalization, and enhancing security.

15. The U.S. and EU should encourage regional cooperation by refocusing/minimizing their bilateral programs in favor of multilateral initiatives.

16. Develop a framework to share, bilaterally and multilaterally, intelligence and information on common border threats, returnees, and terrorist movements.

17. Establish a “clearing house” for lessons learned/best practices on returnees and reintegration programs/initiatives and make them available to all decision-makers in the region.

18. Persuade the EU to increase investments in the Maghreb—Sahel to address not only illegal immigration, but also to improve the plight of border and disenfranchised urban communities.

19. Use media and social media sites as a tool to educate the public and youth on Koranic teachings with explanations.

20. Map different groups and communities in each country that are radicalized or especially susceptible to radicalization and recruiting efforts and share this information when it applies to cross-border communities.

21. Create constructive venues at the local level where youth can vent their frustrations and governments/community leaders can listen and respond—similar to an Ombudsman program.

22. Pool programs that address reintegrating radical returnees, share expertise, and establish joint programs.

23. Assist south-south civil societal cooperation with partnerships with like civil society groups in the north/Europe.

24. Establish “practical” assistance and tools for institution building and/or reform tailored to each country’s needs/context.

25. Analyze why the youth of some countries with large Muslim populations do not join the ranks of foreign fighters, such as India.
North Africa and the Levant continued

26. Create an “exit door” for disillusioned ISIS fighters with accompanying reintegration programs.

27. Establish a “Regional Fusion Cell” to deal with terrorists and returnees to include a series of annual exercises at the regional level.

28. Create entrepreneurial initiatives and programs in the border communities that can replace smuggling and illicit trade.

29. Encourage the creation of an Arab forum to seriously examine modernity, governance, identity, and religion in the 21st century with a broad, well-publicized global dialogue.

30. Be realistic in setting demands/expectations for Libya. Tailor immediate assistance to Libya on national reconciliation, then on institution building/creation.

Chaired by Dr. Jennifer Jefferis of the NESA Center, the Levant working group consisted of participants from Bangladesh, Belgium, China, India, Iraq, Jordan, Spain, Syria, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, the United States, and Yemen. The discussion generated a comprehensive view of the system that is necessary to address violent extremism. When considering the question of “what’s next for the region?”, the group resoundingly concluded that the status quo is not sustainable. The group predicted significant territorial, religious, and political reforms over the next five years.

Several participants anticipated the end of Sykes Picot in the near future. Contributing to the assessment of an unsustainable current territorial alignment were the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Syrian conflict, and the Kurdish question in Turkey and Iraq. The group assessed that the new Sykes Picot (which participants termed “Kerry Putin”) would not be driven by ISIS or an Islamic Caliphate, but rather by the enduring tribal dynamics which have proven more persistent than the authoritarian state. The only alternative to the influence of the tribe would be the development of stronger civil societies, but these options are limited by the presence of authoritarian states.

One participant stated “In the Arab world, we do not produce knowledge, we only consume it.” The assessment was that this dynamic must change in order to produce lasting reform, and that it needs to begin with an in-depth theological discourse that positions scholars and policymakers to challenge the pervasive ideas of radicalism in the region. The ability of this discourse to take place is at least in part dependent on the trend of secularization in government, which threatens to paint all religious political engagement as bad, which only forces the religiously curious to the margins.

The question of corruption and injustice came up repeatedly, accompanied by the prediction that the region is coming up on “Arab Spring 2.0.” There is an abiding anger at political systems that have failed even in the wake of the uprisings. Rather than bringing about sustainable reform, there has been a reinforcement of authoritarianism coupled with multidimensional poverty. As such, the roots of radicalization have not been addressed. As one participate stated, “as long as authoritarianism remains, radicalization will be a threat.” To pursue political security at the expense of democracy and justice is to facilitate new uprisings.

Working Groups
Central Asia

Chaired by Dr. Roger Kangas of the NESA Center, the Central Asia working group consisted of participants from Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, the United States, and Uzbekistan. The opening session began with an overview of threats, emphasizing three key challenges: a lack of knowledge, a lack of cooperation, and a lack of understanding within Central Asia. Specifically, this was in reference to how the states view each other and outside powers, as well as an understanding of transnational threats. This can create perceptions of weakness and bifurcation, but also gives opportunities in certain circumstances. Longer-term challenges such as climate change, water management, and energy were raised. Even though most acknowledged that these were problems in Central Asia, it was difficult to see scenarios where the regional actors would cooperate to solve them. To date, there has been a lot of discussion, but very little concrete cooperative activity.

A theme that carried through the entire conference was brought up early on: is Afghanistan part of Central Asia? Can it be a member of any groupings that focus on Central Asia? Views in the room differed, and these often related to the broader question of “connectivity” – can the Central Asian states be part of cross-regional efforts in the areas of economics, security, and politics. More often than not, the perspectives raised were that Afghanistan was not part of Central Asia, but integral to the security of the region.

The role of outside powers was another theme that resonated throughout the sessions. Are there rivalries between China and India in Central Asia? Views were mixed on this, more because the motives and capabilities of both countries are still evolving. Is the US an influential actor in the region? The general view was that the US can still play a limited role, as seen by the 5C+1 meeting, but ultimately does not matter as much as other countries (e.g., Russia). Would any of these states help Central Asia as a region to create a common vision or identity? Probably not – that is up to the states themselves, and only at a time when they see an advantage in working together. At present, there doesn’t seem much to offer across the regional borders.

The second session continued the discussion on broader threats and challenges to the region. Some participants noted the challenge of “transition” in the region and how political forces need to be better understood. Ultimately, there has to be a paradigm shift away from the “post-Soviet transition” understanding of Central Asia to something else. The process of “state building” needs to be evaluated with current terms and ideas. This would help better explain political and social forces.
Central Asia continued

in the respective countries as they move forward.

During the session’s focus on energy security, it appeared that the role of external actors remains important – either as facilitators of energy integration, or obstacles. In each instance, the recurring theme of “connectivity” surfaced – can Central Asia connect via the Caspian Sea, southward through a post-sanction Iran, Afghanistan, or are the routes of Russia and China the constants for the future? To this end, working group members raised subjects such as the need to systematize visas and tariffs, as well as making specific work projects profitable (TAPI, for example). In each of these, questions such as “who will pay for these projects?” and “who is the leader of the region – from among the Central Asian states themselves?” were asked, but left unanswered. These remain difficult issues when it comes to regional cooperation, especially as all are still determining their own long-term interests and objectives.

The ability of the Central Asian states to truly connect requires a belief that it matters to the individual states. Whether this is in terms of economic development for domestic reasons, or to create stable countries for longer term security considerations, connectivity remains a sought-after goal that hasn’t really been mapped out. Even the assumption that outside powers, such as Russia, China, or Iran, could play a role in integrating the region was tempered – ultimately it is up to the states themselves.

On April 02, the two sessions were devoted to issues of extremism and radicalism, but also general discussions of religion and culture in Central Asia (and beyond). There is no doubt that such topics are sensitive, with opinions and emotions expressed quite openly during the ensuing discussions. The notion of “political Islam” was discussed in depth, with participants debating the philosophical aspects of an “Islamic State” as an ideal versus what exists in reality, to include past and current examples of such political entities. Within the broader trend of attempting to use Islamic precepts in governance and jurisprudence, there are outliers that have become the focus of much media and political debate – that of radicals and extremists. Indeed, as more and more terms are used, such as fundamentalism and Jihadism, how we can successfully analyze and understand the concept of political Islam becomes very difficult. As for the Islamic State, neighboring countries that have a juridical and political connection to Islam (Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, for example) provide examples of how some nations have tried to realize legitimate forms of governance. These stand in sharp contrast to the interpretation of Islam as seen in ISIS/Daesh. Likewise, can a state remain a secular entity with freedom of religion for its citizens? How does one balance between government control and freedom of religion? On a practical level, what does this mean for Central Asia? A good part of this two-session discussion focused on the immediate and practical considerations: could ISIS develop in Central Asia? What about Central Asian “foreign fighters” who return to Central Asia? What about ISIS developing more broadly in the region, to include Afghanistan and Pakistan? Who are the most vulnerable members of society that could be attracted to this extremist discourse and how might the respective governments counter it? While it was difficult to come up
Central Asia continued

with specific, concrete answers to the questions above (and others), working group members did focus on the need to stress “soft power” strategies over “hard power” solutions, simply because one is dealing with an incredibly complex phenomenon that requires more than just imprisonment and military activity. Indeed, only using hard power could exacerbate the problem. The issue of religious education was repeated several times for good reasons: it is at this stage where the ideas of ISIS can be addressed directly. To what extent can NGOs be used to help? Can outside organizations be involved, or would they taint any effort by a (Central Asian) government to address the problem?

The final session on April 03 was largely devoted to discussing the flare-up of violence that took place in the South Caucasus, between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territories near Nagorno-Karabakh. Of central concern for this group was (1) an understanding of the actual conflict itself, to include the legal implications it has for other CIS and CSTO member states; and (2) the implications it might have on Central Asia and the broader region. The discussion focused on the former, with a clear understanding that were the violence to spread, it would most likely draw in other nations due to the collective defense (Article 5) component of the CSTO. Likewise, as a neighbor to the region, Turkey was seriously viewing the ramifications of any continuation of violence. For the Central Asian states, the reactions were more cautious – at present, events in the South Caucasus would have limited impact on any of the these states across the Caspian. Involvement of outside powers was raised, although more in a case of how the prolonging of any conflict could benefit them. Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States were all noted as countries not benefitting from conflict in the region, although some suggested that actors within these countries could take advantage of the instability. In terms of regional integration and cross-regional trade and transit, any violence in the South Caucasus is detrimental.

It was decided that the combined report of the working group will be completed in 2017, following at least two additional meetings of the working group in locations and times to be determined. The final working group plan will be determined by the working group chair in consultation with working group members. The final product will be presented at the 2018 Strategic Studies Summit. The paper will be published on the SSN website and could be adapted for publication elsewhere.
South Asia

Co-chaired by Professors John Gill and Ali Jalali of the NESA Center, participants hailed from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Jordan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and the United States.

Four of the working group sessions were devoted to specific topics of regional interest (China, Iran, so-called “ISIS,” and maritime security), and the final session addressed next steps for the sub-group.

China: As one participant noted regarding the discussion of China, “the general tenor was positive.” Points raised by the opening speakers ranged from internal and external drivers of China’s behavior (internal generally holding primacy) to South Asia’s place in China’s larger geostrategic outlook. Throughout the discussion, all participants raised China’s changing regional role, the importance of its internal dynamics (such as demography) and the criticality of US-China relations. Notably, all also emphasized the opportunities offered by engagement with emerging China. Several participants specifically stressed the importance of regional countries positioning themselves to take advantage of China’s growing presence (without ignoring or sacrificing national security concerns). There is a “new reality and new maturity” in Sino-Indian relations noted one participant, while others highlighted the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a potential “game-changer” for Pakistan and a chance to enhance “human security” for Pakistan’s youthful population. Cautionary notes included the key point that all of the rhetoric of “One Belt-One Road” and CPEC have yet to be converted into reality, that good Sino-Indian relations are essential for regional development, and that China’s involvement in Afghanistan is still evolving, specifically that there seems to be little connection as yet between CPEC in Pakistan and Chinese initiatives in Central Asian countries, thus potentially leaving Afghanistan on the sidelines.

Iran: Opportunity was also a central theme of the discussion about Iran. Most see great potential for commercial interaction with Iran as the sanctions regime changes, with several suggesting that the Iran–Pakistan pipeline project could once again be expanded to include India and possibly even be extended to Bangladesh. At the same time, several cautioned that South Asians will face stiff competition from others in attempting to exploit the opening of commerce with Iran; specific mention was
South Asia continued

made of the “very energetic” Europeans with whom the Iranians may be more comfortable as compared to South Asians. Iran’s foreign policy looking east has been fairly successful in recent years, observed several members of the group, but confidence-building will be key to Tehran’s ties to South Asian capitals. Relations with Iran will continue to be complicated by the serious strains in Iran’s relations with the Arab world; navigating the antagonistic waters between Iran and its Arab neighbors will pose a major challenge for all South Asians through the near term at least. As one participant remarked, “this challenge reminds us of the ideological dimension of regional relations with Iran.” Several commented on the importance of Iran’s internal dynamics. While some speculated that major changes are not likely in the near term, domestic developments will clearly have a significant impact on Tehran’s foreign policy behavior. This consensus view tied in well with the four drivers for Iranian policy as noted by one of the speakers: security, regional connectivity, migration/refugees, and transnational issues, especially narcotics and international crime.

So-called “ISIS”: The entire group objected to proliferation of the term “Islamic state” as giving undue legitimacy to a band of murderous ideologues. While all agreed that “we cannot dismiss Daesh” and that South Asia will always remain “a temptation” for Daesh, most did not see an immediate major threat of Daesh as a mass movement in South Asia (“there is no footprint” today). As one noted, the direct appeal of the movement was limited in South Asia “when the countries are crowded” with other extremist groups. Instead, there was concern that poor governance or political vacuums could generate broad discontent that South Asian groups—even if still “fringe elements” today—could exploit in the future. One participant phrased this possibility as a question: “is ISIS coming to South Asia, or is South Asia going to ISIS?” Another observed that local groups conduct attacks and then claim to be members of Daesh, claims that Daesh leaders accept; he called this a “corporate merger” approach and added that some supposed “ISIS” fighters are looking for causes closer to home in South Asia where they can position themselves as leaders in contrast to Syria where Arabs and Europeans dominate the Daesh hierarchy. At the same time, one participant commented, as proponents of free societies, we must not mistake political dissent for ISIS radicalization. Participants also expressed concern about the large South Asian diaspora communities in Europe, especially in the UK. Young men from these communities go to Syria and then try to recruit other expatriates from their communities in Europe as well as men from their countries of origin. Several participants also argued that Daesh has close links to international criminal networks, a “complete business model” for them as one remarked. At the regional level, many participants agreed with one who suggested that the US needs to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan for an “extended period” to counter the growth of Daesh as well as promoting stability in the country and the region. “Narrative” was a major theme in this discussion as well. Numbers, said one participant, are not as important as ideology in an era where a young man can become “radicalized without ever going out of his room.”

While cautioning that social media is not the only means of recruitment, this participant raised the utility of seminars with companies such as Google and Facebook to address radicalization problems. Stressing the importance of the clergy and the provision of jobs, he argued for moving “beyond the
cliché counter-narrative themes” to cope with the dangers of radicalization. Another participant took it a step further, telling the group he does not believe in counter-narrative: “we should be the narrative,” he stated, and “they should be trying to create a counter-narrative” to us. Finally, several members of the group urged collaboration among all South Asian states to counter Daesh. No one, not even intelligence agencies, favors ISIS, said one participant.

Maritime Security: A lively discussion “covered the waterfront” of maritime security issues in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both traditional and non-traditional aspects of security were addressed. On the traditional side, major themes included the roles of the Indian, US, and Chinese navies in the region, littoral disputes, SLOC security for regional as well as extra-regional countries, and the IOR as a venue for terrorism, piracy, smuggling, and other illicit activities. Combined Task Forces 150 and 151 were mentioned as valuable assets in curbing these traditional threats, supplemented by the international coordination mechanisms that facilitate de-confliction with Indian, Chinese, and other navies that are not members of these task forces. There was no strong consensus on China’s current and possible future presence in the IOR, but all recognized that Beijing has a major interest and that any developments (such as military exercises) have to take China into consideration. Non–traditional security concerns received equal, if not higher, billing. Indeed, several participants opined that thinking on issues in/around the IOR has become overly “securitized” to the detriment of more pressing problems in non–traditional arenas. Fisheries were of particular concern for the participants, but also rising sea levels as nine of the sixteen most threatened countries lie in South Asia—a circumstance that is further complicated by dangerous trends in population growth. While some members of the group were confident that interconnectivity “will certainly happen,” there was some expression of concern that greater connectivity would generate new hazards in areas such as health security. Moreover, many participants lamented the lack of maritime infrastructure, arguing that a focus on “blue economy” and a more scientific approach to the IOR held considerable promise and could help South Asian governments and businesses broaden their vision beyond entrenched “continental mindsets.” The group noted, but did not delve into, maritime boundary disputes. Some members argued that regional governments are all “reactive,” in that they are “stuck in history” and do not look forward. “We keep on compiling problems for the future,” said one. Another participant, however, highlighted recent agreements in the Bay of Bengal as favorable auguries for “developing a sense of interdependence” and approaching such disputes “from a win–win, not zero–sum, perspective.” As in the discussion on Daesh, the group discussed the possibilities for regional cooperation in the maritime sphere. There was general regret at the absence of any solid regional “security architecture.” None of the existing international groupings or regimes has been effective venues for real collaboration historically, but the group saw this as a topic for future exploration to include countries not physically present on the IOR littoral. All regarded international collaboration in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief as especially urgent, coupled with scientific exchanges on the effects of climate change. These considerations suggested to the group the importance of building institutions to manage both resources and competition in the larger IOR region.
The Gulf

Chaired by **Dr. Richard Russell** of the NESA Center, participants of the **Gulf** working group hailed from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Canada, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Yemen.

Key takeaways from the working group included, but were not limited to, the following points:

- There was a great deal of anxiety about the direction of American foreign policy in the region. Many participants complained about what they perceive as a host of ambiguities in American policy.

- Many saw the Obama administration's declaration of a "red line" over chemical weapons use in Syria and subsequent American decision not to use military force as a turning point.

- Many participants criticized the United States for shifting its regional policies away from the Arab states and toward Iran. They judged the Iran nuclear deal to be too favorable to Tehran. They perceive it as an undue "reward" to Iran just as it is stridently backing Assad's regime in Syria and Hezbollah's fight to keep Assad in power. They added that this "reward" was an especially bitter pill as Iran is upping its support for the turmoil in Yemen.

- The group's prognosis for the Gulf military coalition achieving a viable political end-state in Yemen was extremely pessimistic. One insightful and well informed participant judged that Yemen was destined to become a hotbed of Al Qaeda and Islamic State activity in the years ahead.

- Some participants nurture a bitter sentiment from their perception that the Obama administration "cut them out" of the Iran nuclear negotiations.

- Some participants assessed that it was decidedly in Iran's interests to allow the Islamic State to keep Iraq divided and weak. In their view, the Iranian interest in a weak Iraq explains why Iranian-backed militia forces in Iraq have not moved boldly in nearly two years to retake Mosul for their perceived Iraqi clients.

- Many participants were exasperated by the Obama's administration's sluggish efforts to arm Syrian opposition forces. They attribute this sluggishness to a clandestine American effort to cooperate with Russia and Iran to prop-up the Assad regime.
The Gulf continued

- Group members were very pessimistic about the prospects for a Saudi-Iranian detente. Relations are too poor after the Saudi executions and the Iranian torching of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Some opined that the Saudis would resist restoring relations lest they be seen as bowing to Iran as the emerging leader of the Islamic world.

- Some participants expressed dismay that there were not powerful counter-narratives to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda narratives sweeping the region. They opined that the ideology that feeds both al Qaeda and the Islamic State is the Saudi-backed Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. That version of Islam is sweeping the region and into Asia because of Saudi-funded madrassas and due to the South Asian labor force that works in the Gulf.

- The Palestinian-Israeli issue was largely the "dog that didn't bark." There is a perception that the Arab Gulf states are far too busy facing vital national interests to give any more than a passing thought to the plight of the Palestinians. On top of that, the Arab Gulf states tend to share more of Israel's geopolitical perspectives today than in days past, especially vis-a-vis Iran.
About NESA

The NESA Center team consists of 30+ security professionals located on the National Defense University campus in Washington, DC. The mission of the NESA Center is to enhance security in the Near East and South Asia by building sustained, mutually beneficial relationships; fostering regional cooperation on security issues; and promoting effective communications and strategic capacity through free and candid interaction in an academic environment.

About ORSAM

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals Ortadoğu Analiz and Ortadoğu Etütleri.
Strategic Studies Network (SSN) and ORSAM Contact Information

Gawdat Bahgat
SSN Director; Professor, NESA Center
Gawdat.Bahgat@ndu.edu

Roger Kangas
Dean of Academics, NESA Center
KangasR@ndu.edu

Fahad Malaikah
SSN Program Manager, NESA Center
fahad.malaikah.ctr@ndu.edu

Saban Kardas
President, ORSAM
sabankardas@gmail.com