


# Security System of the Persian Gulf: Gradual Transition to a New System from an Iranian Viewpoint

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## **Abstract**

With the Persian Gulf oil supplies remaining as vital as ever to the global economy, the quest for reliable security in this region has never been more important than it is now or for the near and distant future. Roughly 25 percent of the world's oil production originates from the Persian Gulf. It holds as much as two-thirds of the world's oil reserves, and its oil is exceptionally economical to produce. This region, with approximately 622,000 million barrels of crude oil, is the world's most important oil storage area and reservoir. The paper seeks, as its main research question, to propose a general framework that describes the security system of the Persian Gulf, which is currently undergoing a gradual and pragmatic transition, particularly in the near future. Any assessment of new power configurations in the Persian Gulf should cover a range of factors influenced by the political systems of the regional countries and the policies of neighboring and extra-regional powers. Our research methodology relies on a descriptive-analytical approach, and we analyze the data by referring to documents and expert opinions. The proposed idea of a "(Persian) Gulf Security Council" aims to establish a cooperative, viable, and robust regional security framework for the Persian Gulf, composed exclusively of regional states, with observer members drawn from neighboring and trans-regional actors, with the objective of fostering stability, conflict resolution, and security cooperation.

**Keywords:** Persian Gulf, USA, Iran, Security system, Saudi Arabia.

## **Introduction**

After four turbulent decades, which included events such as a revolution, three major wars, and regime changes in the region, defining a security system for the Persian Gulf remains a substantial challenge. Both hidden and overt animosities, rivalries, and conflicts among the Persian Gulf states have revealed the ineffectiveness of previous security arrangements implemented in the region. The nine states of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula – Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and the six members of the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council – are bound together in a regional system but do not constitute a security community.

Our analysis focuses on identifying the factors necessary for a regional security structure that is designed to have a high likelihood of addressing the key parameters in play. In establishing a new security structure for this region, several region-specific parameters must be considered, including: asymmetric threats; regional reassurance; the Arab–Israeli conflict; internal actors and regional tensions, crises, and conflicts; and finally, the roles of external actors (Hunter, 2010, pp. xi–xii). The region faces complex security challenges, ranging from traditional threats such as interstate conflicts to non-traditional risks including cyber-attacks, piracy, and environmental concerns (Goldani, 2024).

The paper aims, as its primary research question, to propose a general framework describing the security system of the Persian Gulf, which is currently undergoing a gradual and pragmatic transition, particularly in the near future. Any assessment of new power dynamics in the Persian Gulf should cover a range of factors influenced by the political systems of the regional countries and the policies of neighboring and extra-regional powers.

The proposed concept of a “Persian Gulf Security Council” seeks to establish a cooperative, viable, and robust regional security framework for the Persian Gulf, composed exclusively of regional states, with observer members drawn from neighboring and trans-regional actors, with the goal of promoting stability, conflict resolution, and security cooperation. Our research methodology relies on a descriptive–analytical approach, and we analyze the data by referring to documents and expert opinions.

## **1. Literature Review**

Existing academic debates on the Gulf region's geopolitical and security dynamics can be broadly categorized into two distinct approaches. First, some studies employ a narrowly defined

framework, limiting their analysis specifically to the Gulf region and its states.

Conversely, a significant portion of the literature contextualizes Gulf security issues within the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. This second strand adopts a broader regional lens, analyzing patterns and dynamics across the MENA region, encompassing the Gulf. This approach offers a more comprehensive perspective on the intricate complexities inherent within this geopolitical space.

Within the first approach, Keyhan Barzegar and colleagues (2012) elaborate on the security architecture of the Persian Gulf through a comparative appraisal. The authors argue that failed strategies and balance-of-power theories, along with arms race dynamics, exacerbate mistrust and animosity in the region. They suggest that any meaningful security arrangement should involve all major regional actors in the Persian Gulf. They conclude that common security can only be achieved through a comprehensive regional security architecture (Barzegar et al., 2012, pp. 7–28).

Garlick and Havlova (2019) examine China's approach to securing and expanding its interests in the Gulf by employing economic diplomacy and strategic hedging amidst Saudi–Iranian regional rivalry. They highlight that China should strengthen relations with two prominent regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, while avoiding hostility toward either of them or the hegemonic power in the Gulf, the USA, in order to secure diversified energy supplies and implement the BRI's trade and infrastructure connectivity goals (Garlick et al., 2020, p. 92).

Abozar Golshani (2018) argues that foreign intervention, due to insufficient attention to local issues, violent military responses to crises, and the approach of some neighboring states toward Iran, constitutes a major source of insecurity in the region (Golshani, 2018, p. 202).

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2024) indicates that four major conflicts in the region since 1980 have contributed to volatile relationships, shaping perceptions of risk, threat, and interest, and influencing foreign, defense, and security policy-making. Other factors, such as revolutionary upheaval, sectarian politics, and the roles of non-state actors and external powers, have further complicated consensus-building on key foreign policy issues (Ulrichsen, 2024, pp. 5–19).

Through the first approach, some works focus on specific aspects of Gulf security. For instance, Doroshenko and colleagues (2024)

explore the evolution of Russia's perspective on Gulf security. Using neoclassical realism, they examine domestic variables that have influenced Russia's foreign policy toward the region, including the presidential factor, state–society relations, and ideological considerations. The study concludes that Russia's engagement with the Gulf is also linked to deteriorating relations with the West. A stronger regional role has allowed Moscow to assert its vision for the region's security structure. Although Russia's security vision has evolved, it shows continuity in fundamental principles such as inclusiveness and phased problem-solving. However, to date, Russia's proposals have not become a major influence in the region, although some remain relevant and potentially applicable, offering opportunities for a future niche role in regional security (Doroshenko et al., 2024, p. 228).

Using the second analytical approach, Del Sarto and colleagues (2024) examine shifting patterns of regionalism and alliance formation in the Middle East following the 2011 Arab uprisings. They argue that, in response to acute political instability and crises, MENA states pursued three strategic paths: cooperation through established regional institutions; formation of new alliances; and ad hoc, informal security collaborations.

James M. Dorsey (2019) posits that the 21st-century “Great Game” is conducted by leaders who explicitly frame themselves within a civilizational rather than national paradigm, drawing borders along civilizational lines both internationally and domestically (Dorsey, 2019, pp. 1–32).

Matthew Gray (2022) observes that the Gulf has very limited security architecture. Even the Gulf Cooperation Council, despite some successes, remains restricted as a platform for dialogue, conflict resolution, and confidence-building. His paper preliminarily examines whether minilateralism—defined as specific, flexible, and informal arrangements involving three or more states established to address particular threats or issues—could provide a framework for future security and economic engagement among Gulf states (Gray, 2022, pp. 1–34). What prompted this research is the highly transitional and tangible nature of conditions in the Persian Gulf in the 21st century, which has not been fully addressed in previous studies.

## **2. Data and analysis**

The subregional status quo is hampered by the geopolitical reality of a combination of three very different subregional powers (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq) and five much smaller states. With two of the

three major actors outside the GCC and not part of any other security bloc or process that might resolve conflicts or build confidence, all three are incentivized to plan for their own defense against one another, and preferably to build a qualitative or quantitative edge over the others (Gray, 2022, p. 22).

Our analysis focuses on identifying parameters for a regional security structure designed to have a high likelihood of covering the key factors in play. Eight basic, region-specific parameters need to be considered in formulating a new security structure for the Persian Gulf: the future of Iraq (independent or under foreign influence); Iran's expectations; asymmetric threats; regional reassurance; the Arab–Israeli conflict; regional tensions, crises, and conflicts; the roles of external actors; and arms control and confidence-building measures (Hunter, 2010, pp. xi–xii).

## **2-1. Basic, Region-Specific Sets of Parameters**

### **2-1-1. Asymmetric Threats**

Some of the most significant players in terms of regional security are not states but non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, as well as other groups that challenge authority through extralegal means or could use violence to hinder the emergence of a viable security structure.

### **2-1-2. The Arab-Israeli Conflict**

Calculations about Middle Eastern politics and U.S. engagement in the region continually return to the Arab-Israeli conflict and, more particularly, to Israeli-Palestinian relations (Hunter, 2010, p. xvi).

### **2-1-3. Regional Tensions, Crises, and Conflicts**

Any viable security structure must also account for tensions, crises, and the possibility of conflict, including destabilization, among its members.

### **2-1-4. Arms Control and Confidence-Building Measures<sup>1</sup>**

The development of a new security structure for the Persian Gulf should include both arms control and confidence-building measures (CBMs). These mechanisms can help introduce rationality into the process of determining security requirements and encourage different parties to adjust their policies. Indeed, the impact of regulating military relationships on political relationships should not be underestimated. Step one is to prevent the military dimension

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1. CBMs

from dominating politics. One approach is to prevent the emergence of an inherently unstable balance of forces, particularly where weapons of mass destruction are involved.

### **2-1-5. Major Internal Actors**

In order to define any viable security arrangement in the Persian Gulf, it is necessary to understand the security concerns of the key internal actors involved.

#### **A: Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia, as the second largest regional power in the Persian Gulf, has demonstrated a lack of confidence in maintaining its security independently and has cooperated closely with and coordinated its actions alongside outside powers, namely the United States. Saudi Arabia is well aware that, despite its large military expenditures and good relations with the West, there are reasons to be concerned about the internal and external security of the country.

Although Saudi Arabia has long aligned itself with the United States in its overall foreign policy orientation, in recent years it has begun to assert greater strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US and has become more proactive in pursuing those priorities that diverge from Washington's objectives (Kamrava, 2025).

In sum, with its attention focused on the developmental promises of Saudi Vision 2030, and with ambitions to transform the kingdom into one of the world's most powerful economies as quickly as possible, the Saudi state prefers to minimize regional tensions wherever possible (Kamrava, 2025). In fact, Saudi officials have explicitly linked Vision 2030 to regional peace: "Saudi Vision 2030 won't work without regional stability and security" (Jacobs, 2023).

Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have determined that their national security extends beyond their physical borders. It is just as important to protect their airspace, territorial waters, and even maritime trade routes (Baabood, 2024).

The role of Salafi discourse elements in Saudi Arabia's Middle East policy should be considered a continuation of the historical alliance between Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh in 1744, which played an important role in shaping the identity, security, and interests of this actor (Karami and Colleague, 2021, p. 239).

#### **B: Iran**

The Persian Gulf holds critical strategic and economic significance globally. Iran's geographic position along this vital corridor grants it a strategic advantage over one of the world's most crucial energy

transit and maritime chokepoints (Boltuc, 2025). Iran, as an important actor, seems dissatisfied with the security arrangements established by foreign powers to date. Iran believes that its rightful position as a leading power in the Persian Gulf has been denied (Barzegar and Colleague, 2012, p. 13). Iran's deterrence strategy in the Persian Gulf is a sophisticated blend of military tactics, ideological rhetoric, the deployment of regional proxies, and naval/missile posturing. The primary aim is to deter aggression by the United States and Israel (Boltuc, 2025). Iran and Saudi Arabia are major regional powers that seek a dominant position in the Middle East. Due to divergent interests, ideologies, and geopolitical goals, the two states have long been in competition, which has sometimes escalated into indirect armed conflicts (Akhbari and Colleague, 2023, p. 88).

Moreover, Tehran has worked to strengthen ties with neighboring countries to discourage them from offering airspace or military bases for attacks against Iran. Tehran has also threatened to target critical assets in those countries in retaliation for any strikes against its territory—specifically, by striking the Persian Gulf's oil fields, which could trigger disruptions in global oil and gas markets, impacting both the West and the Gulf monarchies (Boltuc, 2025).



Source: (Evans, 2025)

**Figure (1): Persian Gulf Region**

**C: United Arab Emirates**

The UAE is seeking to increase its influence in the West Asian region and to play a role more prominent than its actual identity and position in the regional and international arena, aspiring to become a limited regional power. The UAE has formulated its military development plans with the vision of becoming the leading military power in the Persian Gulf region, enabling it to leverage this military capability to achieve political goals in West Asia (Shir Mohammadi and Colleague, 2023).

Aspiring to be a middle power, and perceiving itself as one, the UAE now seeks to exercise a certain level of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis its traditional security provider, namely the United States (Jacobs, 2023). This is most clearly evident in the UAE's relations with Russia, which it refused to condemn following Russia's invasion of Ukraine despite pressure from the US. Instead, in an open display of defiance toward Washington, in December 2023 Abu Dhabi joined Riyadh in hosting President Putin for a highly publicized state visit (Nereim, 2023).

**D: Bahrain**

In the meantime, the island of Bahrain, due to its geostrategic position in the Persian Gulf, has always been a focus of attention for regional and supra-regional powers (Biuck, 2020:198). On September 13, 2023, the United States and the Kingdom of Bahrain signed the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (U.S. Department of State Press Release, 2023), characterized by the White House as a “binding international agreement,” though not as a “treaty” (U.S. Department of State Press Release, 2023). The agreement provides security assurances to Bahrain, an important U.S. military partner in the region, beyond those currently extended to its neighbors, though not as robust as those found in mutual defense pacts (D, Ovall, 2024). In December 2024, the United Kingdom joined a security pact initially agreed upon by Bahrain and the United States following the 2020 Abraham Accords (IISS, 2025). The signing of this new agreement is intended to reinforce a U.S.-led security order in the Persian Gulf and to complement ongoing U.S.-led efforts to normalize relations between Arab countries and Israel. Bahrain currently hosts the largest U.S. naval base in the region, the U.S. 5th Fleet, and is designated as a major non-NATO ally. The agreement does not include a provision similar to NATO's Article 5, which would require the United States to treat any external attack on Bahrain as

an attack on the U.S. Nonetheless, it represents the most extensive security arrangement the U.S. has offered to any Arab country (Heiran-Nia, 2023).

### **E: Qatar**

Like the UAE, Qatar's foreign policy activism is driven by a need for protection from larger and more powerful regional actors (Saouli, 2020). However, whereas the UAE tries to compensate for its small geographic and demographic size by enhancing its military capabilities and strengthening the sustainability of its economic prosperity to emerge as a middle power, Qatar is acutely aware of its status as a small state at both the regional and international levels (Nereim and Colleague, 2023).

## **2-1-6. External Actors**

### **A: U. S. A**

The United States could consider providing formal security guarantees to regional states against aggression from their neighbors and, potentially, from external sources beyond the region. The United States needs to conduct its diplomacy in a way that either fosters positive perceptions among Persian Gulf Arab states regarding its current and future commitments or produces a deterrent effect against potentially hostile countries. This diplomacy could include promoting the development of a regional security structure, provided that related efforts are credibly perceived not as attempts to gain political dominance in the region, nor as a pretext for the United States to withdraw or to absolve itself of regional problems. Rather, these efforts must be seen as creating the basis for sustained U.S. involvement in the region, in which—whether the United States is engaged as an active participant, a mentor, or a residual guarantor of security—it both contributes to a sense of security for local countries and is sustainable within U.S. domestic politics (Hunter, 2010, p. 65).

### **B: European Countries**

In many parts of the Persian Gulf region, a number of Western countries may be more effective than the United States, because they do not carry the historical and political baggage of being heirs to colonial powers, invaders of regional countries, or staunch supporters of the Zionist regime. European states are also well positioned to train local security personnel and provide non-military assistance. The United States should continue to encourage the involvement of European governments, even at the cost of ceding

some primacy, sharing political influence, and accepting joint decision-making (Hunter, 2010, p. 88).

### **C: China**

The Persian Gulf, which contains 55% of the world's oil reserves and 40% of the world's gas reserves, occupies an increasingly strategic position within China's long-term growth trajectory (Marks, 2024; Strauss Center, 2022). Over the past two decades, China has invested significant economic, political, and diplomatic resources in building strong partnerships in the Middle East. The region has become a focal point in Chinese foreign policy and a key land and maritime node along the Belt and Road Initiative. This, however, has increased China's exposure to regional instability, numerous conflicts, and protracted geopolitical rivalries, which have plagued the region for decades.

Its recent high-stakes mediation efforts to broker a diplomatic breakthrough in Iran-Saudi relations—and thus help thaw Tehran's relations with both the UAE and Bahrain—indicate a greater willingness of Chinese leadership to exercise its considerable soft power in strategically important regions and to leverage its good offices with all parties in the Persian Gulf to improve inter-Gulf relations (Ehteshami, 2023, p. 14).

As a relative newcomer, China has only begun to experiment with mediation activities in conflicts that pose a threat to its interests. Compared to peer competitors, Beijing lacks substantive knowledge and experience regarding the means and modalities of conflict mediation. China's approach to mediation, more generally, is still evolving and highly context-dependent. Over the past two decades, China has evolved from a conflict avoider to a conflict manager, willingly involving itself in the mediation process for reasons ranging from protecting interests to promoting a positive image (Marks, 2024).

The Iranian-Saudi rivalry is one of the more notable cases in which Beijing, despite significant political and economic leverage, has adopted the role of facilitator, eschewing substantive traditional mediation in favor of strategically balancing relations with both sides. Iran and Saudi Arabia are arguably two of the most important actors in the Middle East and twin pillars of China's Middle East policy (Marks, 2024).

Saudi Arabia is one of China's most important partners in the region and its largest supplier of crude oil. The scale of Sino-Saudi economic potential has underscored the importance for China of

sustaining and expanding ties with the Kingdom. From 1995 to 2022, Chinese imports from Saudi Arabia grew from \$264 million to \$68 billion, an estimated average annual growth rate of 21% in total exports.

In 2022, crude petroleum accounted for \$56.1 billion, approximately 82% of China's total imports from the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia was China's leading crude oil provider, but it was surpassed by Russia as China diversified its energy imports following the 2022 Ukraine crisis and the U.S.-led Russia oil embargo (Marks, 2024).

China has, until now, managed to remain above the geopolitical fray of Gulf security crises, but the fluctuations of escalation and their destabilizing effects in the broader region threaten China's interests, investments, and trade. Chinese leadership has balanced the need to maintain neutrality, balanced diplomacy, and noninterference with increasing demands from both Iran and Saudi Arabia, both in the region and at home, to secure energy access and protect strategic interests. This has created a tension between Beijing's strategic balancing approach and escalating regional dynamics, which could undermine Chinese interests if left unmediated.

China's leadership has leveraged its neutrality to promote continuous diplomatic messaging emphasizing nonintervention and respect for national sovereignty, which, to an extent, has bolstered its image among Gulf countries as an impartial actor, willing to engage without the preconditions or geopolitical interests associated with the West. China's future, to an extent, will be shaped by its ability to balance diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as long as energy and economic interests continue to drive Beijing's Middle East policy (Marks, 2024).

#### **D: India**

Indian competition with Pakistan, and incipient competition with Iran, is already leading New Delhi to look westward. However, increased Indian involvement in the Persian Gulf would likely be viewed unfavorably by Pakistan, which is already responding to growing Indian influence in Afghanistan, potentially exacerbating existing tensions between the two countries (Hunter, 2010: 88). Due to its desire to be taken more seriously on the world stage, India has tested its capacity to project naval power into the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

**E: Russia**

Russia's foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf is inseparable from its broader diplomacy in the Middle East. Since the beginning of Russia's military deployment in Syria in 2015, Moscow's importance for regional and non-regional actors has been based on two pillars: an expanding Russian military presence in the Middle East (primarily in Syria, but also in Libya) and a "pragmatic" balancing between key regional actors. That core set of priorities shaping Moscow's approach to the region, and consequently the GCC, has remained unchanged.

In the geopolitical sphere, Russia's leadership views the Middle East and the Persian Gulf primarily through the lens of projecting power globally and confronting the West, with regional priorities playing a secondary role. Moscow's involvement in the conflicts in Syria and Libya, its contacts with the Palestinian authorities and Tel Aviv, and attempts to maintain good ties with Iran on the one hand, and the GCC on the other, demonstrate Russia's significance as a global player to the US and EU, compelling the West to take Russia's worldview into account and maintain communication channels with Moscow (Bijan, 2023, p. 126).

Although the Persian Gulf ranks third in Russia's strategic priorities after Europe and Asia, the region remains strategically important for several reasons: physical proximity (e.g., Iraq is about 600 km from Grozny), the absence of ideological or physical barriers separating Russian Muslims—who make up about 7% of Russia's population—from their Gulf counterparts, and the potential impact of regional unrest on Russia. The Persian Gulf's energy resources, as well as the fact that about 20% of Israel's Jewish population is of Russian origin, further underscore its importance. Ensuring security and building confidence in the Persian Gulf is a priority in Russia's foreign policy agenda (Bijan, 2023, p. 132).

Iran and Russia have expanded cooperation, finding common ground in their opposition to the liberal international order and in their mutual pursuit of alternative economic and military partnerships (Azizi, 2025).

Despite growing convergence, Iran and Russia's partnership remains constrained by key structural factors. While both countries share an interest in challenging what they perceive as a Western-dominated global order, their revisionist agendas differ in both scope and strategy. Iran's opposition to the U.S.-led international system is rooted in ideological hostility driven by its revolutionary outlook (Azizi, 2025). By contrast, Russia has historically adopted a

more pragmatic approach, shaped by its desire for recognition as a major global power (Yefremenko, 2025).

### **2-1-7. The Strategic Partnership Treaty**

The “Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation” reflects the evolving dynamics of Iran and Russia's relationship, in terms of both opportunities and limitations. The 20-year agreement, comprising 47 articles, outlines cooperation across multiple sectors, including security, energy, trade, and cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup>

While it establishes a framework for expanding bilateral ties, its contents reveal a deliberate effort by both sides to deepen cooperation in select areas without committing to a full-fledged alliance (Azizi, 2025).

Ultimately, the Iran-Russia partnership serves as a model of pragmatic alignment in a shifting global landscape, in which systemic pressures may push adversaries closer together, even as the boundaries of their cooperation remain firmly defined (Azizi, 2025).

### **2-2. Iran's Position and Approach**

Iran's geopolitics, regardless of the type of government in power, prioritizes neighborly relations as a central foreign policy issue. Historical experience over the last two centuries shows that the projection of Iran's power in the region has always been linked to the creation of a stable and peaceful environment, the reduction of foreign interference, and the expansion of neighborly relations to achieve endogenous regionalism.

The Iranian approach is to strengthen neighborly relations in order to achieve regional stability and counter interventionist powers in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Therefore, neighborhood policy is considered a strategic cornerstone for Iran. However, despite the existence of Iran's officially declared policy, the implementation of the neighborhood policy in practice has always faced significant obstacles (Jafari et al., 2023, p. 41). Iran should be recognized as a regional power, given its inherent capabilities and capacities (Qasemi and Colleague, 2014, pp. 51–52).

Iran considers shared security among energy producers and consumers and the observance of mutual security as essential conditions for the security of the Persian Gulf. It views this, on the

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1. “Full Text of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement,” *Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, January 17, 2025, <https://irangov.ir/detail/456479>.

one hand, as a product of mutual relations between neighbors within the framework of collective security, and on the other hand, as a product of relations with other international actors, particularly industrialized countries. Iran emphasizes the sovereignty of regional countries over the Persian Gulf and the maintenance of stability without foreign interference, advocating for the establishment of a principled and reassuring framework that forms the basis for common understanding among all Persian Gulf states. Iran also considers the presence of foreign armies as a factor that encourages fundamentalism and generates tension in the region (Qasemi and Colleague, 2014, p. 47).

**Official Iranian viewpoints include:**

- Creating a common security alliance or system can enhance not only security but also the capacity for regional economic cooperation, particularly through greater coordination and interaction with influential Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia.
- Iran's security concerns at the regional level can be mitigated through multilateral cooperation arrangements.
- Iran can enhance its moral and spiritual standing by upholding Islamic values through regional dialogue and negotiations, while promoting tolerance.
- A model of peaceful coexistence within the framework of collective security is desirable as both a short-term and long-term solution.
- Considering existing capacities and needs in the Persian Gulf, Iran's foreign policy should be more active than in the past. While interacting with Gulf countries, Iran should pursue security through common cultural and security frameworks, enabling the Islamic world to benefit from collective security mechanisms (Jafari et al., 1402, p. 42).
- The rejection of foreign powers' presence in the region is a consistent principle of Tehran's policy. A defining feature of Iran's view on regional security arrangements is its opposition to major trans-regional powers in the Persian Gulf. Iran does not consider the presence of major powers a factor of stability, but rather as a source of tension and conflict (Qasemi and Colleague, 2014, pp. 51–52).

**2-3. Factors of Divergence and Escalation of Disputes and Conflicts**

The absence of a common security strategy, deepening distrust, the decline in regional cooperation, and divergent security attitudes—

together with the erosion of traditional hegemony and the emergence of new multipolarity, mental and psychological obstacles among rulers regarding cooperation and collective security, shifting patterns of friendship and hostility, environmental and geopolitical challenges, the growing influence of the Zionist regime in the region, fragile economies in some states, the pervasive crisis of democracy in regional states, cultural, social, and particularly religious heterogeneity, the continuation of the arms race, and the erosion of traditional hegemony—are all categorized as the most significant obstacles to establishing a solid and lasting context of cooperation (Rostami and Colleague, 2023, p. 36).

### **2-3-1. The (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council: A Flawed Security System**

The (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is currently considered the only multilateral security framework in the Persian Gulf; however, it suffers from several structural limitations. Primarily, the GCC functions largely as a *de facto* collective defense alliance aimed at countering Iran, thereby excluding key regional actors such as Iran and Iraq, as well as external stakeholders with significant security interests in the Gulf, including China, the European Union (EU), India, Russia, and the United States. Furthermore, the GCC lacks an institutionalized mechanism for crisis management, conflict resolution, or the implementation of stability-enhancing measures. It also does not provide a structured forum for Gulf states to engage in open dialogue regarding security concerns and strategic threats (Wehrey and colleagues, 2015, p. 4). This absence of an inclusive and cooperative security architecture, particularly given the transnational nature of many security challenges in the region—which necessitates broader multilateral cooperation—underscores the need to consider establishing a new, innovative, and comprehensive security system in this strategically significant and highly complex region.

The Persian Gulf states remain, at least for now, reliant on Washington as a security guarantor. Most GCC countries host U.S. military bases and continue to depend heavily on the United States for arms. Nevertheless, the lack of a vigorous U.S. response to the Ansar Allah attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE has prompted both countries to hedge against their traditional reliance on Washington's security umbrella, particularly regarding the protection of their airspace and waterways. The GCC's recent "New Vision" for regional security cooperation highlights the Gulf states'

growing inclination to take security into their own hands. The proposed plan aims to enable all six GCC member states to more effectively protect and manage their borders, with tangible components including joint military exercises, shared intelligence platforms, and integrated defense structures (Baabood, 2024).

By prioritizing regional security and stability, fostering strategic partnerships, and safeguarding vital economic resources and energy supplies, the GCC aims to reduce dependency on external security actors. However, the effectiveness of this initiative in enabling member states to fully assume responsibility for their security will depend on the operational integration of border-security measures, political unity among members, and the capacity to respond swiftly to evolving threats in the region (Baabood, 2024).

For the first time since its inception, the GCC announced its “Vision for Regional Security” at a ceremony held at its headquarters in Riyadh on 28 March 2024. While presenting the document, GCC Secretary General Jasem Mohamed Al Budaiwi stated that the “Vision for Regional Security is not just a political commitment, but an ethical dedication that unites us all.” The vision emphasizes that it is founded on the principles of shared destiny and indivisible security among member states, asserting that any threat to one constitutes a threat to all (Kumar Pradhan, 2024).

The October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, followed by Israel's months-long and ongoing assault on the Gaza Strip, has significantly reshaped the security considerations of GCC states.<sup>1</sup> For the GCC, the perceived decline of U.S. support for the Saudi-led war against Ansar Allah in Yemen, combined with the continued and multifaceted threat posed by the Iran-backed Yemeni militia, reinforced the perception of a diminishing U.S. security umbrella in the region. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, which had long regarded the United States as a primary security guarantor, recognized the need to adapt to this new reality (Baabood, 2024).

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1. Iran's unprecedented missile and drone strikes on Israel, launched in retaliation for an Israeli bombing of the Iranian embassy complex in Damascus, sent a clear message to regional countries of Tehran's military reach. Despite a relatively successful rapprochement between Iran and the Gulf states following the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian reconciliation agreement in March 2023, the Iranian attack on Israel alarmed the Gulf states. Although Tehran reportedly disclosed the scope of the operation to its Gulf neighbors before its launch, its scale and nature forced these countries to reassess their security priorities (Baabood, 2024).

For the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf as a whole, the recent Israel-Iran confrontation has emphasized the strategic importance of airspace security. While Iranian retaliatory strikes on Israel did not directly threaten GCC states, the latter were particularly concerned about Tehran's use of Jordanian airspace, given Jordan's shared border with Saudi Arabia. Israel and Jordan, together with U.S. and British military forces stationed in the region, successfully intercepted 99 percent of the drones and missiles launched by Iran, a development that did not go unnoticed in the Gulf (Baabood, 2024).

### **2-3-2. Required measures to increase mutual convergence**

To establish a joint regional security framework, several mechanisms and centers should first be envisioned where experts and foreign policy advisors can meet and exchange ideas. A certain degree of consensus is necessary regarding security goals, principles, and norms among regional actors, despite differences in national interests. Regional initiatives—whether governmental or non-governmental—should be promoted and sustained, including dialogues among parliamentary delegations and exchanges through artistic, scientific, and cultural groups (Barzegar and colleagues, 2012, pp. 23–24). Since many international conflicts are rooted in identity disputes, intercultural dialogue can provide contexts for redefining identities and addressing the underlying causes of these conflicts. One effective approach is to create spaces for transnational interactions that facilitate convergence from the grassroots level upward to sovereign actors.

Practical measures to advance regional security could include creating an interconnected security system that balances power and reforms both regional and multilateral defense structures, investing in public and joint education programs to mitigate climate change, and promoting reforms in water-intensive agricultural practices. Efforts should also focus on eliminating historically negative perceptions among regional countries through tools such as media collaboration and joint film projects, identifying opportunities and threats while reducing existing tensions, fostering a shared understanding of regional issues and a commitment to non-interference in each other's internal affairs, and strengthening broad economic relations as a foundation for cooperation at other levels. Additionally, establishing joint institutions, concluding partnership and cooperation agreements, and continuously developing such collaborations can enhance regional security and stability (Rostami and colleagues, 2023, pp. 52–53).

Robert E. Hunter emphasizes the importance of a genuine willingness among a critical mass of regional states to participate in a regional security framework, recognizing that such engagement is more likely to promote their security than acting against the system or abstaining. Member states should also be prepared to pursue specific arms control measures and confidence-building measures (CBMs), including establishing multilateral political and military commissions to reduce tensions and manage conflicts, implementing agreements on incidents at sea, freedom of shipping, and counterpiracy cooperation, cataloging and defining military capabilities, and limiting the acquisition of destabilizing weapons. Nonmilitary cooperation, such as expanding economic relations, can further reduce tensions and build security, highlighting the need to integrate both military and nonmilitary approaches into a comprehensive regional security strategy (Hunter, 2010, p. 146).

### **Conclusion**

Leaders in the Persian Gulf regularly make foreign policy decisions with domestic imperatives at the forefront of their considerations. Issues such as weak legitimacy, sectarianism, and Islamism must be addressed alongside the broader need to maintain popular support and elite cohesion. These domestic factors remain deeply intertwined with foreign and security policies across the subregion.

As has often been the case in its history, the Persian Gulf once again finds itself in a paradoxical position. On one hand, for the first time in years, some of the main regional actors have chosen to set aside their differences and proactively pursue measures intended to reduce tensions. This development has been largely driven by domestic political considerations within each state, resulting in at least cordial diplomacy between former adversaries.

Any Persian Gulf security framework relies not only on indigenous efforts but also on external contributions. External engagement is necessary to foster a system based on the balance of interests rather than the balance of power. In the current context, regional actors focus primarily on deterrence, while great powers often exacerbate existing tensions. Constructive dialogue within the region is essential for building a new system of conflict management. Through a structured process of confidence-building measures, regional actors can participate in managing security challenges collectively. Such cooperation can gradually foster mutual trust and reassurance in an atmosphere historically marked by mistrust. The resulting “security spillover” could replace the

current ineffective balance-of-power paradigm with a system grounded in a balance of shared interests.

In the short term, challenges reflecting common interests or shared concerns—such as climate change, water security, and cultural or tourism coordination—should be reframed as opportunities for cooperation and convergence. In the medium term, promoting economic interdependence through shared commercial benefits and mutual investment in regional infrastructure—including roads, ports, oil and gas facilities, and energy transmission lines—can strengthen security ties among Gulf states. Additionally, fostering a common security perspective through diplomatic and academic dialogue among policymakers, authorities, and experts can, over time, contribute to the establishment of a stable and sustainable regional security framework.

Looking ahead, the number of peripheral and trans-regional actors is expected to increase, with China, Russia, and India becoming significant players in the region. While Iran and Saudi Arabia appear to be moving toward greater cooperation and reducing tensions, the presence of external powers is likely to remain a key factor for some time. The involvement of Israel depends largely on the nature of Iran's relations with Arab Gulf states, as Israel seeks to position itself in the region by promoting an atmosphere of Iranophobia and Shia phobia.

The proposed concept of a “Persian Gulf Security Council (PGSC)” aims to establish a cooperative, viable, and robust regional security framework, composed primarily of regional states, with peripheral and trans-regional actors serving as observer members. The PGSC would seek to foster stability, conflict resolution, and cooperation across security, economic, environmental, and cultural domains. While pioneering and ambitious, such a framework remains an attainable goal for the region's future.

Establishing a comprehensive Gulf Security Council is a strategically significant but highly complex initiative due to regional rivalries, geopolitical tensions, and historical distrust. Although the idea may currently appear idealistic, a regional security framework could serve as a feasible mechanism for enhancing stability, resolving conflicts, and promoting cooperation. The proposed council would include Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as core members, with external powers—including Turkey, India, the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China—participating as non-voting observers. The council's structure could be organized into

specialized committees to address key security concerns and foster collaboration:

- 1- High Council of Security (HCS):** Serves as the supreme decision-making body, responsible for defining long-term security policies, coordinating crisis responses, and guiding diplomatic initiatives.
- 2- Defense & Military Cooperation Committee (DMCC):** Focuses on joint military drills, counterterrorism efforts, and non-aggression pacts, while also reducing arms race tensions and enhancing coordination of border security.
- 3- Conflict Resolution & Mediation Committee (CRMC):** Facilitates diplomatic dialogue and arbitration mechanisms, addressing bilateral and regional disputes, such as maritime boundaries and resource conflicts.
- 4- Maritime & Energy Security Committee (MESC):** Ensures the security of shipping lanes, prevents piracy, and safeguards energy trade and critical oil and gas infrastructure.
- 5- Environmental & Climate Resilience Committee (ECRC):** Focuses on climate change adaptation, desertification, water security, biodiversity protection, and pollution control.
- 6- Cultural Convergence & Rapprochement Committee (CCRC):** Promotes intercultural dialogue and historical reconciliation, supports academic exchanges, tourism, and media collaborations to foster mutual understanding, and encourages joint cultural and sports events to strengthen regional unity.

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