International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

PERSIAN GULF SECURITY: THE EU PERSPCTIVE

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https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.9201

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate security dynamics of the Persian Gulf region, examining the geopo-litical interactions among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran, Iraq, and external powers including the EU, Turkey, China, India, the US, and Russia. Through comprehensive analysis, it highlights the multifaceted nature of regional security, driven by economic interests, historical rivalries, and the impact of global geopolitical shifts. The findings reveal that effective multilateral cooperation, sustainable economic practices, and proactive diplo-matic engagement are critical to achieving long-lasting stability in the region. We ask: How do the security con-cerns of the GCC states influence their foreign policy toward Iran and Iraq? What role do external powers such as the US, Russia, and China play in shaping the economic and security landscape of the Persian Gulf? To what extent does regional cooperation (or lack thereof) affect the efficacy of counter-terrorism efforts among Gulf states? What strategies can be employed to enhance diplomatic relations and reduce tensions among competing regional powers? The security dynamics of the Persian Gulf are characterized by a complex interplay of histori-cal animosities and economic dependencies, particularly in energy resources. The influence of external powers exacerbates regional rivalries but also provides opportunities for cooperation, particularly in counter-terrorism and trade. Effective policies addressing shared threats, like terrorism, require multilateral frameworks that priori-tize collaborative approaches over unilateral actions. Economic diversification is essential for reducing the Gulf states' vulnerability to oil price fluctuations and enhancing their geopolitical clout. The Persian Gulf security environment is shaped by a blend of regional aspirations and global interests, necessitating a multifaceted ap-proach to conflict resolution and cooperation. The research underscores the importance of fostering dialogue and building trust among regional actors while engaging with major global powers to mitigate tensions. Only through comprehensive strategies that integrate security, economic development, and cultural understanding can the Per-sian Gulf region hope to achieve lasting peace and stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: EU, Power Broker, Persian Gulf, Iran, Iraq, Persian Gulf, Geopolitics, Regional Security, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) , Iran, Economic Cooperation, Counter-terrorism.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

At the hour when the desert wind cools and the sea turns from bronze to ink, the Persian Gulf re-veals its oldest truth: this has always been a region suspended between peril and promise. Like the courts of Arabian Nights, its ports and palaces are places where merchants, envoys, sailors, and soldiers cross paths, carrying with them not only goods and arms but stories, grievances, and frag-ile hopes. Today, once more, the Gulf stands at a decisive threshold. The

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

lamps are lit, the audi-ence gathered, and the storyteller must choose wisely how the tale unfolds—toward ruin through rivalry, or toward endurance through shared design.

In this moment of tightening geopolitical knots, security in the Gulf can no longer be imagined as a single sword held by one ruler, nor as a wall raised against imagined foes. The threats that stalk the region move like djinn: asymmetric, elusive, and capable of changing form. Maritime insecu-rity, missile proliferation, cyber incursions, energy chokepoints, and proxy conflicts do not re-spect borders drawn in ink or sand. A robust response must therefore resemble the wisdom of Scheherazade herself—layered, adaptive, and patient—binding night to night through coherence rather than brute force. Security must be woven as a tapestry: shared maritime surveillance, coor-dinated air and missile defense dialogues, confidence-building military mechanisms, and crisis communication channels that prevent miscalculation when tempers flare and signals blur.

Yet in the old tales, power alone never secures the kingdom. Prosperity and legitimacy arise when trade routes flourish and markets hum. The Gulf's economic arteries—energy flows, logistics cor-ridors, digital infrastructure, and financial hubs—are both its greatest strength and its most tempt-ing vulnerability. A comprehensive strategy must therefore bind security to economic interde-pendence, transforming zero-sum rivalries into shared stakes. Joint investment frameworks, cross-border infrastructure planning, energy transition cooperation, and resilient supply-chain agree-ments can act as golden threads tying neighboring states together. When ports depend on one an-other, when grids and data flows are intertwined, conflict becomes costly not only in blood but in bread.

But the oldest wisdom of the region teaches that neither armies nor gold alone hold a realm to-gether. Culture—memory, faith, language, and ritual—has always flowed across the Gulf more freely than politics admits. Pearl divers prayed in shared waters; scholars traveled between courts; poets crossed sectarian lines long before modern acronyms hardened identities. Any lasting blue-print for stability must therefore cultivate cultural and societal exchange as a strategic asset rather than a decorative afterthought. Academic consortia, religious dialogue platforms, youth exchang-es, heritage preservation projects, and media cooperation can soften the edges of mistrust that mil-itary agreements alone cannot reach. These are the quiet stories told at dawn, shaping perceptions long after treaties fade.

In this expanded vision, regional cooperation becomes not an act of naïve optimism but of disci-plined imagination. It requires inclusive forums where rival powers speak without surrender, where external actors listen more than they lecture, and where smaller states are not reduced to pawns in greater games. It also demands a calibrated international role: not the heavy hand of domination, but the steady presence of guarantors, facilitators, and investors who understand that stability in the Gulf reverberates far beyond its waters, shaping global energy markets, trade flows, and strategic balances.

Thus the Persian Gulf's future resembles an unfinished tale, its ending unwritten. The choice be-fore regional and international stakeholders is stark. One path repeats the familiar tragedy—escalation, fragmentation, and episodic crisis. The other embraces a comprehensive, layered strat-egy that binds security, economy, and culture into a single narrative arc. Like the stories of old, this approach does not promise a world without danger,

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

but it offers something rarer: continuity, resilience, and the chance that tomorrow's dawn will find the kingdom still standing, its stories still being told.

Argument

We argue a cooperative Persian Gulf, in which the GCC states, Iran, Iraq, and other regional actors actively engage in dialogue, joint security initiatives, and economic collaboration, could pro-foundly reshape both regional order and global stability. By reducing longstanding tensions and fostering trust, such cooperation would enhance predictability and security across the region. Ri-valries that have historically fueled proxy conflicts, sectarian competition, and intermittent crises could give way to structured mechanisms for conflict management and crisis resolution. Coordi-nated efforts on shared challenges, including maritime security, energy infrastructure protection, and the management of transnational threats, would not only mitigate immediate risks but also cultivate a culture of collaborative governance. Economic integration would likely deepen as states pursue joint development projects, harmonize regulatory frameworks, and encourage cross-border investment, reinforcing the Gulf's resilience and interdependence.

The implications for global stability would be equally significant. A stable Gulf region would re-duce strategic tensions for major external powers, such as the United States, the European Union, and China, while diminishing the likelihood of crises that could disrupt energy markets and global trade routes, particularly the critical Strait of Hormuz. By decreasing volatility in oil and gas sup-plies and bolstering the resilience of global supply chains, cooperation in the Gulf would produce tangible economic benefits worldwide. Beyond economics, a cooperative Gulf could serve as a platform for multilateral security arrangements, peacebuilding initiatives, and joint responses to climate and humanitarian challenges, thereby strengthening mechanisms of global governance and reducing the risks of unilateral interventions.

Strategically, such collaboration would lessen the intensity of regional proxy wars and lower the potential for miscalculation or escalation, establishing confidence-building norms that normalize dispute resolution and enhance diplomatic predictability. External powers might increasingly ori-ent toward partnership-based engagement rather than unilateral strategies, fostering a more bal-anced and multilateral approach to regional security. Economic dividends could extend beyond energy to include joint investments in infrastructure, technology, and renewable energy projects, further integrating the Gulf into global markets. In essence, a cooperative Persian Gulf would rep-resent a transformative shift, recasting the region from a zone defined by rivalry and fragmenta-tion into one characterized by stability, interconnectivity, and strategic foresight, with cascading positive effects for both regional order and global security.

A cooperative Persian Gulf, built on sustained dialogue, joint security initiatives, and economic collaboration, could fundamentally alter the dynamics of regional order and global stability. When regional actors—including the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq—engage in structured cooperation, trust-building mechanisms such as shared maritime patrols, crisis communication channels, and multi-lateral forums for conflict resolution can reduce the likelihood of escalation and miscalculation. These security frameworks not only address

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immediate threats but also create an environment in which economic integration can flourish. Predictable security conditions would encourage cross-border investment, joint infrastructure projects, and coordinated management of energy resources, linking stability directly to prosperity.

Economic interdependence, in turn, reinforces security cooperation. As Gulf states become more invested in shared development projects and interconnected markets, the incentives for maintain-ing stability increase. Energy infrastructure, transportation networks, and technology ventures that span multiple states create tangible stakes in peaceful relations, making conflict less attractive and costly. Moreover, coordinated responses to transnational challenges—including climate risks, migration pressures, and cyber threats—strengthen institutional capacity and foster a sense of col-lective responsibility that extends beyond traditional security concerns.

The interplay between security and economic collaboration also has far-reaching global implica-tions. A stable and economically integrated Gulf reduces volatility in energy markets, secures crit-ical trade routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, and diminishes the need for unilateral interventions by external powers. Confidence-building and multilateral engagement can transform the Gulf into a hub of regional governance, where diplomacy and joint problem-solving replace confrontation and uncertainty. This cycle—where cooperation enhances stability, stability encourages invest-ment, and investment strengthens incentives for cooperation—creates a self-reinforcing mecha-nism that could sustain both regional order and global security over the long term.

Ultimately, conceptualizing Gulf cooperation as an interconnected system of security mechanisms and economic integration highlights how practical, policy-driven measures can generate structural change. By aligning strategic, economic, and governance interests, such an approach offers a pathway for transforming a historically fragmented and high-risk region into one characterized by predictability, resilience, and enduring stability, with benefits that resonate far beyond the Gulf itself.

Objectives

The research aims to analyze the security dynamics of the Persian Gulf, focusing on the interac-tions between regional and international actors. It will evaluate the role of the European Union in fostering stability and security in the region, particularly through economic and diplomatic rela-tionships. Additionally, the research intends to identify the critical factors influencing the effec-tiveness of collaborations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the EU.

Scope

This study will investigate the historical background and geopolitical factors of the Persian Gulf while assessing the current security challenges facing the region. It will examine how internal po-litical structures of Gulf nations impact regional stability and explore the influence of external powers on the security landscape. Furthermore, the research will develop strategies to enhance collaborative efforts among stakeholders in both trade and security sectors.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Research Questions:

i. How do regional dynamics contribute to the security challenges faced by Persian Gulf nations?
ii. What role does the European Union play in supporting regional security through economic partnerships?
iii. How can the integration of diverse stakeholder perspectives lead to more effective security policy outcomes in the region?

This research is significant for several reasons. It offers insights into the complexities of Persian Gulf security, contributing to the broader discourse on international relations. It provides a framework for policymakers to understand the implications of regional cooperation. The findings may enhance scholarly understanding of the role of the EU in global security contexts.

LITTERATURE REVIEW

The literature on European Union engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) high-lights the evolving nature of EU foreign policy in a region characterized by complex political and economic dynamics. Gerd Nonneman's article, "European Policies Towards the Gulf: Patterns, Dynamics…," provides a historical-institutionalist analysis of EU policy shifts, particularly in response to events such as the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis. Nonneman traces how the EU has navigated competing strategic interests, balancing economic partnerships, energy considerations, and security cooperation while contending with internal institutional constraints that limit the Un-ion's ability to act cohesively. The work is grounded in extensive analysis of primary sources, including official EU documents and diplomatic communications, offering a detailed account of the mid-2010s to early 2020s policy evolution. While the study effectively maps the trajectory of EU engagement, it gives comparatively less attention to the internal political dynamics of indi-vidual member states and to the agency of GCC actors in shaping bilateral relations, leaving a partial perspective on the reciprocal nature of the EU-GCC interaction.

In contrast, the edited volume Gulf Cooperation Council: Achievements and Challenges adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examine the GCC itself, exploring its role in state formation, re-gional coordination, and interactions with external partners including the EU. Contributions from a range of scholars offer a comprehensive assessment of the GCC's institutional structures, deci-sion-making processes, and the balance of power among member states. The volume highlights the organization's successes in fostering cooperation while acknowledging structural and political limitations that constrain its regional influence. Although the book provides valuable insights into the internal dynamics of the GCC and its external engagements, its treatment of the EU is more peripheral, offering limited analysis of how European policies have influenced regional develop-ments or the ways in which the EU-GCC relationship has evolved over time.

The scholarly examination of European Union (EU) policies towards the Gulf Cooperation Coun-cil (GCC) reveals a complex interplay of strategic interests, institutional dynamics, and regional developments. Gerd Nonneman's article, "European Policies Towards the Gulf:

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Patterns, Dynam-ics..." Taylor & Francis Online, offers a nuanced analysis of EU foreign policy evolution, particu-larly in response to the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis. Nonneman employs a historical-institutionalist framework to trace the shifts in EU engagement with the Gulf, highlighting the challenges posed by institutional fragmentation and the varying priorities of member states. His analysis underscores the EU's struggle to formulate a cohesive policy amidst competing national interests and the broader geopolitical context.

In contrast, the edited volume "Gulf Cooperation Council: Achievements and Challenges" Taylor & Francis Online provides a comprehensive overview of the GCC's internal dynamics and its ex-ternal relations. The contributors adopt a multidisciplinary approach, examining the GCC's role in state formation, regional coordination, and interactions with external actors, including the EU. The volume highlights the institutional challenges faced by the GCC, such as decision-making processes and the balance of power among member states, which influence its external engage-ments.

When considered together, these works offer complementary perspectives on EU-GCC relations. Nonneman's focus on EU policy evolution provides insights into the Union's strategic objectives and the constraints it faces in the Gulf region. Meanwhile, the edited volume offers a broader un-derstanding of the GCC's internal mechanisms and its approach to external partnerships. Integrat-ing these perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping EU-GCC relations, emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach that considers both in-ternal and external factors influencing policy outcomes.

Taken together, these works provide complementary perspectives on EU-GCC relations. Nonne-man’s analysis foregrounds the European side, detailing policy adjustments and strategic priori-ties, whereas the edited volume illuminates the institutional and political realities within the GCC that shape its responses to external actors. Integrating these perspectives allows for a more com-prehensive understanding of the interaction between EU policy objectives and GCC structures, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints inherent in this multilateral relationship.

In their influential work, Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick provide a comprehensive analysis of security in the Persian Gulf, examining it from international, national, regional, and popular perspectives. A brief overview of their key points is as follows:

The Persian Gulf's security dynamics, with a rich history shaped by colonialism, regional conflicts, and power struggles, have weakened consensus among Gulf states. Understan-ding these historical patterns is crucial for analysing contemporary security challenges. Differing national interests, historical grievances, and ideological differences contributed to this erosion. It is now more crucial than ever that a unified and urgent approach is taken for practical security cooperation.

Potter and Sick proposed a new regional security framework for the Persian Gulf that addresses internal and external threats. They stress that cooperation among Gulf states, including Iran and Arab nations, is crucial for stability.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The younger generation, often overlooked, plays a pivotal role in shaping the Gulf's future security landscape. Their perceptions, aspirations, and attitudes toward regional security significantly impact policy decisions. Bridging generational gaps and fostering dialogue are critical for sustainable security.

The authors argue that the secure Persian Gulf benefits all stakeholders. Stability promotes economic growth, energy security, and regional development. Collective efforts should prioritise common interests over historical animosities. In summary, Potter and Sick emphasise the historical context, erosion of consensus, the need for a regional security system, and the role of generational perspectives in shaping security dynamics in the Persian Gulf. Their work underscores the importance of cooperation and dialogue for a secure and prosperous region.

Jillian M. C. Forsters piece "The Gulf States and the European Union: Perspectives on the Global Order" examines the historical and contemporary relations between the GCC and the EU, examining how both entities navigate the global order. She explores the EU's role as a normative power and its engagement with the Gulf states, emphasizing shared interests in trade, energy, and regional stability. The study highlights the EU's strategies in promoting democratic values and human rights, juxtaposed with the GCC's focus on sovereignty and economic growth.While Forster provides a comprehensive analysis, the work could benefit from a more critical examination of the EU's internal challenges and how they impact its foreign policy towards the Gulf. Additionally, the influence of other global powers, such as the United States and China, on EU-GCC relations is not sufficiently addressed. Incorporating these aspects would offer a more nuanced understanding of the geopolitical dynamics at play.

Robert M. W. Lee in Security in the Persian Gulf: A Critical Perspective offers a detailed assessment of the multifaceted security challenges in the Persian Gulf, considering both regional actors—such as Iran, Iraq, and the GCC states—and external powers like the United States. He critiques conventional security paradigms and advocates for inclusive approaches that account for the concerns of all stakeholders. The study underscores the importance of diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and regional cooperation in promoting security. The analysis is heavily U.S.-centric, with limited engagement of the perspectives of other regional actors. Incorporating the viewpoints of Iran and other Gulf states would enhance the comprehensiveness of the study. Additionally, the practical feasibility of the proposed security frameworks in the current geopolitical environment is not fully addressed, leaving some recommendations aspirational.

The reviewed works collectively illuminate EU-GCC relations and Persian Gulf security issues. Nevertheless, future research would benefit from a more critical engagement with EU internal dynamics, greater inclusion of diverse regional perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of geopolitical and security challenges in the region.

Anoushiravan Ehteshami's book Dynamics of Change in the Persian Gulf: Political Economy, War, and Revolution illuminates the intricate interplay between domestic and global forces shaping the region's political economy and international relations.

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The book examines the polarizing effects of war, revolution, and power politics on Persian Gulf countries, contributing to security dilemmas and responses.

It addresses how oil income significantly influences the Gulf States and societies. It has accelerated generational shifts while creating a delicate balance between prosperity and instability. The dialec-tical relationship between oil wealth and security is central to the subregion.

He addresses the urgency of a different security structure. Given the Gulf's strategic significance, a new security framework is crucial. This structure should address both internal and external challenges. Cooperation among the Gulf States, Iran, and external powers is essential.

The ideal levels of security cooperation are as follows: (1) Intra-Gulf level: Enhanced cooperation among Gulf States; (2) Regional level: Involvement of external actors (e.g., Iran, Iraq) in regional security; and (3) Global level: Integration into the broader international security system. In summary, Ehteshami underscores the need for an reimagined security architecture in the Persian Gulf, emphasizing cooperation, stability, and a multilevel approach.

We will revert to this before the conclusions.

Christian Coates Ulrichsen's The Gulf States in International Political Economy offers a single-author, comprehensive overview of the politics, economy, and external relations of the six GCC states. Ulrichsen adopts a political economy framework, emphasizing the interplay between state structures, resource wealth, and external economic and security partnerships. His analysis traces how domestic governance models, economic diversification strategies, and geopolitical position-ing shape the GCC's international engagements. The work provides essential context for under-standing the environment in which the EU operates, highlighting the structural and strategic fac-tors that condition European engagement. While thorough and accessible, the book primarily fo-cuses on the GCC perspective, providing less systematic analysis of the EU's policy strategies, limiting its utility for understanding the reciprocal dynamics of EU-GCC relations.

In contrast, The European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council: Towards a New Path?, a re-cent edited volume, examines EU-GCC relations across multiple dimensions, including trade, en-ergy, security, and political cooperation. The editors and contributing authors adopt a compara-tive, multi-disciplinary approach, combining political science, international relations, and eco-nomic analysis. The volume explores why the EU-GCC relationship remains underdeveloped de-spite significant economic and strategic complementarities. Key analytical points include the structural obstacles to deeper engagement, such as institutional mismatches, regulatory differ-ences, and competing member-state priorities, as well as opportunities for advancing partnership through coordinated trade agreements, energy cooperation, and security dialogue. The principal limitation of the volume lies in its dispersed focus; while the comparative chapters provide breadth, the multi-author structure occasionally produces uneven analytical depth and overlapping treatment of similar issues, making it more suitable for thematic exploration than for a singular, cohesive argument.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Finally, A. Baabood's article, "The Interaction of Gulf States and the European Union," provides an early, theoretically informed discussion of the paradoxical nature of European engagement in the Gulf. Published in 2007, the article situates the EU as strategically dependent on Gulf energy supplies and economic linkages, yet institutionally limited in exerting substantial influence. Baa-bood employs a constructivist and institutionalist lens, emphasizing the constraints of EU foreign policy mechanisms and the complexity of multilateral coordination among member states. The analysis underscores the structural and normative paradox of a European actor with significant strategic interests but limited practical leverage. While foundational and insightful, the article's primary limitation is its temporal scope: written in the early post-2000 context, it does not fully capture subsequent shifts in EU-GCC relations, such as those prompted by the Qatar crisis, securi-ty realignments, or evolving trade and energy agreements.

Collectively, these three works illustrate complementary conceptual and analytical approaches to EU-GCC relations. Ulrichsen foregrounds the political economy and internal dynamics of the Gulf states, providing a foundation for understanding the context of engagement. The Springer edited volume emphasizes the multidimensional, comparative assessment of bilateral and multilateral relations, highlighting obstacles and potential for EU-GCC cooperation. Baabood provides a theo-retically grounded reflection on structural constraints and strategic dependence, offering insights into the enduring challenges of European influence in the region. Synthesizing these perspectives enables a more holistic understanding of EU-GCC interactions, integrating the internal character-istics of Gulf states, the EU's policy instruments and limitations, and the structural, normative, and economic factors shaping bilateral and multilateral engagements over time.

Caroline Koch's LSE paper, Constructing a Viable EU–GCC Partnership, provides a critical, poli-cy-oriented assessment of the structural and political constraints on deeper EU–GCC cooperation. Koch adopts a hybrid approach, combining elements of institutional analysis with normative poli-cy evaluation. The paper examines both EU and GCC institutional capacities, highlighting mis-matches in decision-making procedures, regulatory frameworks, and political priorities that limit the effectiveness of partnership initiatives. The main analytical points include the need for strong-er EU internal coordination, the challenge of reconciling diverse member-state interests, and the GCC's heterogeneity in political and economic structures. Koch emphasizes pragmatic avenues for progress, such as targeted sectoral cooperation in energy, climate, and security, as well as in-stitutionalized dialogue mechanisms. While the paper is highly valuable for its actionable recom-mendations, its focus on policy solutions sometimes comes at the expense of deeper theoretical engagement or a longitudinal assessment of EU–GCC relations.

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) report, Summit of Ambition: How European and Gulf States Can Build a Newly Strategic Relationship (October 2024), provides a concise, pol-icy-driven perspective on EU–GCC relations following the inaugural EU–Gulf leaders' summit. The report's approach is primarily pragmatic and applied, oriented toward actionable recommen-dations for policymakers rather than scholarly theorization. Key analytical points include the identification of new political momentum in the EU–GCC dialogue, opportunities for joint action in energy transition, climate change, and security cooperation, and the recognition of persistent challenges, such as geopolitical tensions in the

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

region and the EU's limited leverage compared with the United States. The report's strength lies in its timeliness and direct relevance to current diplomatic developments. However, the analysis is limited by its narrow temporal focus and lacks a deeper exploration of the structural and historical factors that have shaped EU–GCC relations, which reduces its generalizability beyond the immediate policy context.

SUMMARY

The literature on EU-GCC relations and Persian Gulf security has evolved from historical and normative analyses toward more complex assessments of regional stability and cooperation. Con-ceptually, studies often frame the EU as a normative power and the Gulf states as pragmatic actors prioritizing sovereignty and economic growth, while security analyses draw on traditional para-digms that emphasize state-centric threat assessments. Practical approaches in the literature focus on diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and multilateral engagement, yet they often remain aspirational, with limited attention to implementation challenges, non-state actors, or grassroots initiatives. Research gaps persist in linking these dimensions: the influence of internal EU politics and institutional fragmentation on Gulf policy is underexplored, the perspectives of regional ac-tors beyond Western allies are insufficiently represented, and interdisciplinary insights from eco-nomics, technology, and environmental studies are rarely integrated. Additionally, comparative analyses of EU strategies vis-à-vis other global powers and sector-specific cooperation in areas such as energy, digital technology, and climate resilience remain limited. Addressing these gaps requires studies that simultaneously account for conceptual frameworks, historical evolution, and the feasibility of practical measures, offering a more comprehensive understanding of EU-GCC relations and Persian Gulf security.

The reviewed literature reveals several notable gaps. In EU-GCC relations, there is limited atten-tion to how internal EU politics, institutional fragmentation, and economic constraints shape its engagement with the Gulf. The influence of other global powers, such as the United States and China, is also underexplored, as is the evolution of sectoral cooperation beyond trade and energy. In studies of Persian Gulf security, non-state actors and civil society are largely absent from anal-yses, while proposed diplomatic and security frameworks often lack practical assessment under current geopolitical tensions. Many works remain heavily U.S.-centric, overlooking Iranian, GCC, and intra-Gulf perspectives, and emerging threats such as cyber risks, maritime vulnerabilities, and climate pressures receive little attention. The broader journal literature similarly emphasizes state-centric approaches, with limited interdisciplinary integration or subnational perspectives, and few studies translate findings into actionable, context-sensitive policy recommendations.

These gaps suggest opportunities for further research that examines EU internal dynamics in rela-tion to Gulf policy, incorporates regional and non-state perspectives, and adopts interdisciplinary approaches integrating political, economic, and environmental factors. Comparative analyses of EU strategies versus other external powers, exploration of sectoral cooperation in emerging tech-nologies, and attention to bottom-up security and governance initiatives could significantly deep-en understanding of EU-GCC relations and Persian Gulf security dynamics.

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Scholarly Contribution

The proposed study will make a significant contribution to the field of international security stud-ies by addressing critical gaps in the existing literature on EU-GCC relations and their broader implications for regional stability in the Persian Gulf. By systematically examining the evolving dynamics between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the research will illu-minate underexplored dimensions of interregional diplomacy, strategic alignment, and normative influence.

It will advance scholarship in three interrelated ways. First, by bridging empirical and conceptual lacunae in current analyses of EU-GCC engagement, the study will offer a nuanced understanding of how institutional cooperation, economic interdependence, and security dialogues shape the ar-chitecture of Gulf regionalism. Second, it will develop and refine theoretical frameworks—drawing from constructivist, realist, and institutionalist traditions—that can be applied to future research on international relations in volatile and multipolar regions. These frameworks will help scholars and practitioners interpret the interplay between external actors and regional coalitions, especially in contexts marked by asymmetrical power and normative contestation. Third, the study will generate policy-relevant insights by recommending actionable strategies for sustainable security arrangements in the Persian Gulf. These may include mechanisms for confi-dence-building, joint crisis management, and inclusive governance structures that accommodate both state and non-state actors. The emphasis on pragmatic, context-sensitive solutions will en-sure that the research is not only academically rigorous but also strategically useful for policy-makers, diplomats, and regional stakeholders.

By integrating empirical depth with theoretical innovation and policy foresight, this structured approach will yield a comprehensive analysis that enriches the discourse on interregional security cooperation and contributes enduring value to the study of global governance and conflict preven-tion.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method design that links theoretical perspectives to struc-tural dimensions and empirical evidence through a layered analytical framework. The framework integrates conceptual, analytical, and operational components to examine the dynamics of EU–GCC relations. Its vertical logic moves from abstract theoretical lenses to defined structural di-mensions and finally to measurable indicators, while its horizontal logic traces each dimension consistently across all three layers. This structure enables the analysis to link conceptual explana-tions with observable evidence in a systematic way.

Within this framework, three complementary qualitative methods are employed: process tracing, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies. These methods are selected for their ability to uncover causal mechanisms, interpret policy meaning, and identify cross-case variation, respec-tively. Process tracing is used to investigate the causal pathways linking institutional change, policy decisions, and partnership outcomes in EU–GCC relations. It allows for a detailed reconstruction of how specific initiatives emerged from evolving internal dynamics within the EU or shifts in GCC governance. This involves sequencing key

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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events, triangulating policy documents, inter-views, and meeting records, and testing competing explanations against the observed process. Process tracing is particularly suited to exploring the mechanisms that connect the theoretical lay-er (such as institutionalist and policy coordination perspectives) to the structural layer (EU insti-tutional coherence and EU–GCC interface mechanisms).

Discourse analysis is applied to examine how language and framing shape the political meaning of the EU–GCC relationship. By analysing speeches, summit communiqués, policy papers, and media interventions, the study identifies the dominant narratives through which the EU and GCC portray each other. This approach reveals how discursive constructions influence policy priorities, institutional behaviour, and perceptions of strategic relevance. It is especially useful for connect-ing the conceptual layer (constructivist and interregionalist perspectives) to the structural layer (the EU–GCC interface and the external geopolitical environment).

Comparative case studies are used to analyse variation in EU engagement across different GCC states and policy sectors. This approach enables the study to contrast cases along key structural dimensions, such as domestic political economy characteristics, sectoral cooperation depth, and levels of institutional interaction. By comparing cases like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, the analysis identifies the conditions under which EU–GCC cooperation advances or stalls. Compara-tive case studies provide the main link between the structural and operational layers, enabling em-pirical testing of how the dimensions identified in the framework manifest in practice.

Together, these methods operationalise the analytical framework by tracing theoretical assump-tions into observable structures and measurable outcomes. Their combined use ensures that the study captures both the causal complexity and the interpretive dimensions of EU–GCC relations, providing a robust basis for evaluating their past evolution and future prospects.

Figure 1 – Conic Analytical Layers

Empirical Topic	Framework Dimension	Lens / Analytical Angle
Middle East sub-systems	Regional security complexes	Power interactions, fragmentation
Energy trade	Political economy	Dependence, leverage, trade flows
China's rise	External influence	Strategic economic influence, infrastructure
Iranian schemes	Subregional strategies	Regional alliances, projection of influence
Iraq, EU, Turkey	Multi-level actors	State-building, external intervention, EU engagement
GCC, Iran – Iraq & External Actors	National	Modern Iranian diplomatic savyness

Structure

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

We begin by introducing the analytical framework building on prior research and allowing a multilayered approach to better understand the dynamics and complexity of this region. The empirical focus will be on Middle East sub-systems, Energy trade, China's rise, Iranian schemes, Iraq, the EU & Turkey and then off course the aspects of security governanace concerning GCC, the involvement of Iran and Iraq as well as that of external actors. In chapter , we proceed to look into the EU's energy trade with the region, and next analyse China's inroads into the Persian Gulf. This sets the stage for considering Iran's subregional schemes in terms of alliance-building, influence projection, and interactions with neighboring states. The role of Iraq, the EU, and Turkey is analyzed as a case of multi-level actor engagement, balancing internal state dynamics with external influence. We then arrive at the end at how GCC could evolve, the involvement of Irak and Iran not mention a sound examination of further proof of the interventions of third parties in this thouroughly penetrated region due to its role in world's ressource politics. We shall examine the workings of the EU's SSR Program in Iraq, and the case for a Pax Europeana in the Middle East before discussing the case for a Saudi-Iranian concordat build up around Saudi pre-eminence in the Red Sea and Iranian sub-regional leadership in the Persian to evolve out of the GCC+1 format.

In the conclusions, we summarise my findings and take perspective regarding other great powers' position in the Persian Gulf and take perspective. In the appendices, we lay out the land on strengthening of governance on minorities in Iran and quote the GCC-EU Summit declaration before rehashing on a Persian Gulf Naval Cooperation scheme.

2.0 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

An analytical framework is the structured conceptual architecture that guides how a research project examines and explains a complex phenomenon. It links theoretical foundations (how we understand the world), analytical dimensions (which components we examine), and operational tools (how we measure and analyse them).

Its purpose is to provide:

- conceptual clarity by defining what is being studied,
- analytical structure by identifying the core dimensions of the phenomenon,
- methodological coherence by connecting concepts to data, and
- explanatory logic by specifying how the elements interact causally or functionally.

A strong analytical framework is not just a list of variables. It is a system of relationships that organises research questions, data collection, and interpretation around a coherent set of assump-tions and dimensions.

The Three-Layer Architecture

A robust framework rests on three interlocking layers. Think of these as the vertical scaffolding of the study:

1. **Conceptual–Theoretical Layer**

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This layer anchors the framework in scholarly debate. It defines key concepts, sets the boundaries of the study, and links them to theoretical approaches. It explains the why of the research.

2. Analytical–Structural Layer

This layer breaks down the phenomenon into core dimensions and specifies their relation-ships. It organises the field of study into categories or axes that can be examined systemat-ically. It explains the what is being studied and how its pieces fit together.

3. Operational–Empirical Layer

This layer translates abstract concepts into observable indicators, data sources, and meth-ods. It sets out how the research questions will be answered. It explains the how the study will actually work in practice.

These three layers form a vertical logic: theory shapes structure, structure guides measurement, and measurement tests theory.

Conceptual–Theoretical Layer(ideas, paradigms, boundaries)	Analytical–Structural Layer(core dimensions, subfields, relationships)	Operational–Empirical Layer(indicators, data, methods)
Political economy theory (Ulrichsen) — State structures, resource rents, diversification, external economic linkages	**GCC domestic structures and heterogeneity** — variation in governance models, fiscal dependence on oil, strategies of economic diversification	Economic structure indicators (rent dependence, FDI inflows, diversification indices); sources: Gulf statistical agencies, IMF, World Bank; methods: comparative case studies
Institutionalism and constructivism (Baabood) — Normative constraints and coordination problems in EU foreign policy	**EU institutional capacity and coherence** — decision-making structures, member-state heterogeneity, regulatory regimes	Indicators of institutional output (joint positions, budget lines, policy instruments); sources: EU documents, EEAS data; methods: process tracing, institutional analysis
Interregionalism and strategic partnership theory (Springer volume) — Cooperation between regional organisations	**EU–GCC interface mechanisms** — summits, dialogues, trade agreements, joint energy/security initiatives	Depth and scope of agreements (MoUs, summit declarations, trade deals); sources: official EU–GCC documents; methods: network mapping, legal analysis
Policy learning and coordination theory (Koch) — overcoming structural and political obstacles to cooperation	**Sectoral policy cooperation** — energy, climate, trade, security	Sectoral output indicators (projects launched, funding flows, technical dialogues); sources: EU funding reports, sectoral policy papers; methods: policy evaluation, content analysis
Geopolitical realism and external-influence frameworks (ECFR, broader literature) — competition and alignment in a multipolar order	**External geopolitical context** — role of US, China, regional rivalries (Qatar crisis, Iran–Saudi tension)	Indicators of external alignment (military sales, external mentions in communiqués, voting alignments); sources: SIPRI, policy statements; methods: discourse analysis, scenario modelling

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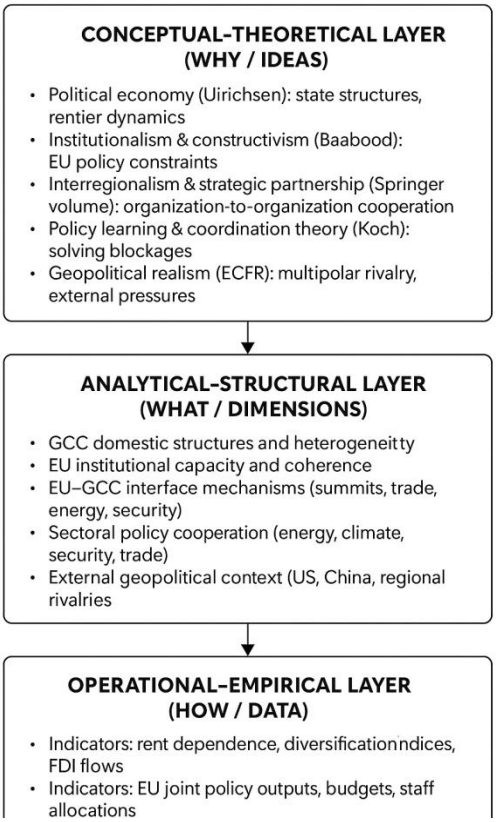
This table shows how each conceptual lens (left column) is linked to a structured dimension of analysis (middle column) and made empirically measurable and testable (right column).

- Ulrichsen contributes mainly to the Gulf-side structural dimension through a political economy lens.
- Baabood contributes the EU-side institutional constraint dimension through an institution-alist/constructivist lens.
- The Springer volume maps the interregional structure through a multidisciplinary compar-ative approach.
- Koch contributes a policy coordination dimension framed by institutional analysis and pol-icy design.
- The ECFR report anchors the geopolitical environment dimension through a realist policy lens.

These strands are normally studied separately; the framework fuses them into one multi-layered architecture so you can analyse how EU institutional coherence, GCC heterogeneity, sectoral cooperation, and geopolitical constraints interact to shape the trajectory of EU–GCC relations.



SUMMARY

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This analytical framework is structured around two intersecting logics. Vertically, it progresses from abstract theory to concrete evidence. The top layer establishes the theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis. The middle layer breaks down the EU–GCC relationship into key analyti-cal dimensions, while the bottom layer translates these dimensions into measurable indicators, data sources, and methods for empirical investigation. Horizontally, each dimension can be fol-lowed consistently across the three layers, linking conceptual ideas to structural features and then to specific data. For example, political economy theory connects to the study of GCC heterogenei-ty and is examined through indicators such as rent dependence and diversification; institutionalist theory links to EU institutional capacity and is analysed through policy output data; and interre-gionalist theory frames interface mechanisms, which are studied through data on summits and agreements. This design integrates theory, structure, and evidence into a coherent and systematic framework.

3.0 THE EU'S STRATEGY TOWARDS THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST AND THE PERSIAN GULF

1.The Persian Gulf as a Subregion of the Middle East: Comparative Approaches to the Maghreb and the Levant

The Middle Eastern sub-systems function as interacting regional security complexes, where states and non-state actors continuously negotiate influence, alliances, and strategic space. [Insert your existing narrative here. The Persian Gulf, the Maghreb, and the Levant represent three interrelated yet distinct subregions within the wider Middle Eastern geopolitical space, each shaped by its own constellation of historical legacies, political structures, and socio-economic dynamics. The Per-sian Gulf is often defined by its energy-based economies, highly securitized political environ-ments, and dense web of intra-regional rivalries and alliances, while the Maghreb embodies a hy-brid Mediterranean-Atlantic orientation, combining post-colonial state-building trajectories with growing economic integration and migration linkages to Europe. The Levant, by contrast, occu-pies a pivotal crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa, marked by protracted conflicts, di-verse cultural and religious landscapes, and ongoing struggles over sovereignty, borders, and iden-tity. Understanding how the states and societies in these subregions perceive their collective iden-tities and articulate their positions toward the European Union is crucial for interpreting their for-eign policy behaviours and developmental aspirations. Such an inquiry illuminates how historical experiences, regime types, and socio-economic priorities shape their engagement with European institutions, from security partnerships and trade frameworks to cultural diplomacy and civil soci-ety exchanges. Recognising these differentiated perceptions and interaction patterns can enable the EU to craft more context-sensitive and regionally attuned strategies—ones that support con-flict mitigation, economic diversification, and cross-regional cooperation while enhancing the EU's credibility and effectiveness as a partner in the Middle East.

Despite their geographical proximity, the Persian Gulf, the Maghreb, and the Levant have devel-oped markedly different modalities of engagement with the European Union, reflecting the heter-ogeneity of their political economies and strategic priorities. The Maghreb states maintain the most institutionalised and multidimensional ties, anchored in Association Agreements under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and reinforced by frameworks such as

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the European Neighbour-hood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean. These linkages encompass trade liberali-sation, infrastructure investment, regulatory approximation, and substantial cooperation on migra-tion governance and security, illustrating the EU's ambition to foster gradual socio-economic convergence. By contrast, the Levantine states exhibit a more fragmented and uneven pattern of engagement: while countries such as Jordan and Lebanon participate in ENP frameworks and ben-efit from EU support for governance reform, humanitarian relief, and refugee management, their relations are shaped as much by conflict dynamics and post-crisis reconstruction as by long-term integration logics. The Persian Gulf monarchies, meanwhile, pursue largely transactional and sec-tor-specific relations with the EU, centred on energy cooperation, investment flows, arms sales, and diplomatic dialogue through the GCC–EU format, without deep institutional integration or normative convergence. These differentiated interaction patterns underscore the need for the EU to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and instead adopt a stratified and adaptive strategy that ac-counts for the varying degrees of institutionalisation, mutual dependency, and geopolitical volatil-ity that characterise each subregion.

Recognising these divergent trajectories has critical implications for the EU's strategic posture in the Middle East. Rather than pursuing uniform policy templates, the EU would benefit from adopting a differentiated engagement architecture that aligns with the structural realities and po-litical sensitivities of each subregion while fostering selective cross-subregional synergies. In the Maghreb, where institutional frameworks and interdependence are comparatively advanced, the EU can deepen regulatory and infrastructural integration, support green and digital transitions, and leverage migration and mobility partnerships to stimulate inclusive growth and youth employ-ment. In the Levant, by contrast, EU policy should prioritise resilience-building through conflict mitigation, governance reform, and long-term socio-economic recovery, while embedding these efforts in regional confidence-building measures that reduce the spillover of instability. Engage-ment with the Persian Gulf should focus on forging strategic sectoral alliances—in energy diversi-fication, critical raw materials, climate adaptation, and digital innovation—while developing structured diplomatic dialogue that enhances the EU's visibility as a geopolitical actor and con-tributes to de-escalation in Gulf rivalries. At the same time, the EU could experiment with cross-subregional platforms—linking Maghrebian renewable energy capacity to Gulf investment capi-tal, or Levantine reconstruction projects to Mediterranean logistics networks—thus creating posi-tive interdependencies that soften geopolitical fragmentation. By tailoring its instruments to the distinct conditions of each subregion while fostering selective interconnections, the EU can posi-tion itself not merely as a donor or market, but as a long-term strategic partner shaping a more cooperative and stable Middle Eastern order.

Taken together, these observations underline the importance of approaching the Middle East not as a monolithic geopolitical arena but as a constellation of distinct yet interconnected subregions whose relationships with the European Union are mediated by contrasting histories, political economies, and security environments. Appreciating this diversity is a prerequisite for designing policies that are both contextually sensitive and strategically coherent. The following section examines these subregional dynamics in greater depth, tracing how the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Persian Gulf have engaged with the EU across economic, political, and societal domains. By situating current interaction patterns within their broader historical and geopolitical contexts, this analysis seeks to clarify the

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opportunities and constraints shaping the EU's role in the region and to identify entry points for more effective and sustainable forms of cooperation.

Persian Gulf

The European Union's 2022 Joint Communication on a Strategic Partnership with the Gulf represents a structural turning point in EU engagement with the Persian Gulf. Prior to 2022, the EU lacked a coherent Gulf strategy and relied instead on fragmented sectoral policies focused on trade, energy, and development cooperation. The 1988 EC–GCC Cooperation Agreement provided an institutional framework but remained technocratic and largely apolitical. For much of the 2000s and 2010s, EU engagement with the Gulf was implicitly mediated through Iran, with JCPOA diplomacy substituting for a broader regional approach. As a result, the Gulf was treated as an economic space rather than a strategic region.

The 2022 Joint Communication was the first EU document to frame the Gulf as a strategic neigh-bourhood in its own right. It integrated security, energy transition, climate cooperation, connectiv-ity, and geopolitical stability into a single policy narrative. Importantly, the Communication in-troduced a deliberately flexible architecture combining regional and bilateral engagement. It rec-ognised the GCC as a collective interlocutor while explicitly allowing for differentiated bilateral partnerships with individual Gulf states. This design avoided formal hierarchy but enabled varia-ble geometry in implementation. Within this framework, Saudi Arabia emerged de facto as a pivotal bilateral partner without being explicitly designated as such. At the same time, Iraq remained institutionally outside the Commu-nication but became increasingly central through parallel partnership and stabilisation mecha-nisms. Iran, by contrast, appeared only as a regional challenge, not as a participant in cooperative Gulf structures. In this sense, the Communication implicitly excluded Iran from the emerging re-gional order.

Subsequent EU practice has both validated and stretched the 2022 framework. The institutionali-sation of EU–GCC summitry after 2024 reflects successful implementation of the regional pillar. However, intensified bilateralism with Saudi Arabia and the hardening of EU policy toward Iran have exceeded the Communication's original balance. Overall, the 2022 Joint Communication did not constitute a fully articulated Gulf strategy but rather an enabling document that facilitated the emergence of a differentiated 3 + 1 multi-bilateral policy mix.

The EU–GCC pillar functions as the Union's primary instrument for regional stabilisation with-out hierarchy. Summit statements are carefully calibrated to avoid privileging any single Gulf state, including Saudi Arabia, thereby preserving the fiction—and the utility—of collective re-gional balance. Over time, the language employed has evolved from narrowly trade-centred coop-eration toward a security-adjacent yet explicitly non-militarised discourse, encompassing mari-time security, de-escalation, and crisis prevention as shared regional goods. This track enables the EU to remain visibly embedded in the Gulf as a regional actor while insulating itself from the po-litical sensitivities and reputational risks inherent in deeper bilateral alignments.

Table

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Dimension	EU–GCC (Regional)	EU–Saudi Arabia (Bilateral)	EU–Iraq (Stabilisation Partner)	EU–Iran (Adversarial Engagement)
Political framing	"Strategic partnership" framed in collective, depoliticised language (EU–GCC Summit, Joint Declarations)	"Pivotal partner" language stressing Saudi Arabia's regional weight and leadership role	"Sovereignty, stability and reform" narrative	"Serious concern", "non-compliance", and conditional engagement
Summit density & symbolism	High since 2022–24: first EU–GCC summit institutionalised a regional track	Increasing bilateral political contacts, often on margins of multilateral fora	Regular Cooperation Council meetings, low symbolic escalation	No summits; communication mainly via Council conclusions and sanctions decisions
Security language	Maritime security, de-escalation, counter-terrorism framed as shared regional goods	Regional security, Red Sea, Iran, Yemen increasingly explicit	Security sector reform, counter-ISIS, border control	Proliferation, regional destabilisation, drones, missile programmes
Economic narrative	Connectivity, energy transition, investment facilitation, regulatory cooperation	Energy (oil, hydrogen), investment, Vision-2030 alignment	Reconstruction, infrastructure, development finance	Marginalised due to sanctions; economic language largely absent
Normative content	Present but diluted (human rights referenced without conditionality)	Selective and cautious; normative issues downplayed in summit language	Strong governance, rule of law, anti-corruption emphasis	Central and confrontational (human rights, repression, IRGC, sanctions)
Institutional trajectory	Structured dialogue, thematic working groups, move toward SPAs	Bespoke bilateral track outside GCC logic	PCA-based, capacity-building architecture	JCPOA framework eroded; replaced by sanctions regime
Role in Gulf balance	Platform for EU presence without taking sides	Anchor state shaping EU access to Gulf geopolitics	Buffer and mediator between Gulf–Iran dynamics	Object of pressure; excluded from cooperative regional formats

Its structural weakness, however, lies in its tendency toward lowest-common-denominator outcomes, producing procedural depth without corresponding strategic ambition.

The EU–Saudi Arabia pillar has evolved into a form of strategic bilateralism by stealth, reflect-ing a quiet but consequential recalibration in the Union's Middle East posture. Although official EU texts continue to affirm engagement with the GCC as a collective entity, Saudi Arabia is in-creasingly treated as structurally distinct in both tone and substance.

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This differentiation is not codified institutionally but is instead expressed through discursive shifts, agenda-setting priori-ties, and selective silences that cumulatively amount to a de facto special status.

Recent joint language has become markedly more geopolitical, moving beyond traditional trade and energy formulations to foreground Red Sea maritime security, regional de-escalation and me-diation roles, and long-term energy transition pathways explicitly aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision-2030 framework. In doing so, the EU implicitly acknowledges Riyadh not merely as an energy supplier or regional partner, but as a central node in emerging regional order-shaping pro-cesses linking the Gulf, the Horn of Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Saudi Arabia's grow-ing convening power—whether in relation to Sudan, Yemen, or broader Arab–Iranian dynamics—has further reinforced this perception.

Equally significant is the calibrated restraint evident in the EU's normative discourse. References to human rights, political reform, and rule-of-law conditionality are noticeably softened when compared with EU engagement with Iran, and even with Iraq, despite comparable or greater con-cerns in substantive terms. This selective moderation signals a conscious trade-off: normative assertiveness is deprioritised in favour of preserving strategic access, influence, and cooperation on security and energy transition agendas deemed systemically consequential. Rather than indicat-ing a wholesale abandonment of values, this approach reflects an implicit hierarchy of interests in which Saudi Arabia occupies a privileged position.

The cumulative implication is that the EU tacitly recognises Saudi Arabia as a system-shaping actor whose regional weight, financial leverage, and geopolitical reach warrant exceptional han-dling. This recognition operates without formal acknowledgement or treaty-level differentiation, relying instead on adaptive diplomacy and rhetorical flexibility. In effect, the EU has begun to practice differentiated partnership management in the Gulf, elevating Saudi Arabia to a quasi-strategic anchor while maintaining the fiction of GCC-level uniformity. This evolution under-scores a broader shift in EU external action: from rule-centric engagement towards a more posi-tional and power-sensitive diplomacy in regions deemed critical to global energy, security, and connectivity transitions

The EU–Iraq pillar constitutes a functional stabilisation track characterised by relative coherence and low political friction. Summit and cooperation council statements consistently emphasise state capacity, sovereignty, institutional reform, and mediation, framing Iraq as a necessary an-chor of regional stability. Iraq is discursively positioned as a bridge actor, linking the Arab world, the Gulf monarchies, Iran, and the EU itself. In this relationship, development assistance, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement are mutually reinforcing, producing the EU's most inter-nally consistent Gulf-adjacent policy. Yet this coherence comes at the cost of ambition, as EU leverage remains limited and engagement largely technocratic rather than strategically transform-ative.

The EU–Iran pillar, the "+1" in the configuration, stands apart as an adversarial track defined by exclusion rather than integration. Iran is structurally absent from the cooperative Gulf architecture constructed through EU–GCC and EU–Saudi formats. The language of EU communications has shifted decisively from conditional engagement toward normative

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containment, centred on sanc-tions, human rights violations, and regional destabilisation. Increasingly, EU–GCC and EU–Saudi communiqués reference Iran without Iranian participation, reinforcing a pattern of indirect cen-sure and diplomatic marginalisation. The strategic cost of this evolution has been a discernible erosion of the EU's credibility as a neutral mediator in Gulf security affairs.

Table

Category	Trade Volume (EUR bn)	EU Outward FDI (EUR bn)	EU Inward FDI (EUR bn)	Combined Total (EUR bn)
GCC (regional total)	161.7	235.9	92.5	489.9
Saudi Arabia	69.9	30.0	18.0	117.9
Iraq	22.2	7.0	1.5	30.7
Iran	4.7	0.0	0.1	4.8

The GCC region clearly dominates the EU's economic footprint in the Persian Gulf, with both outward and inward FDI underscoring a robust two-way investment relationship. European firms maintain substantial stakes across energy, infrastructure, finance, and services, while Gulf inves-tors increasingly diversify their portfolios into European markets, highlighting a reciprocal and strategically significant economic interdependence.

Saudi Arabia, although formally part of the GCC, stands out as a distinct bilateral partner, re-flecting both the scale and sophistication of its engagement with the EU. Beyond substantial trade in machinery, chemicals, and high-tech goods, Saudi capital contributes meaningfully to inward FDI in Europe, particularly in finance, technology, and energy sectors, reinforcing the kingdom's strategic role as both a market and an investor in EU economic circuits.

Iraq remains a smaller yet strategically important partner, where trade flows are dominated by energy products, and EU outward FDI supports reconstruction, infrastructure, and capacity-building projects. While inward FDI is modest, it signals a nascent but growing confidence of Gulf and Iraqi stakeholders in European investment frameworks, positioning Iraq as a bridge between the Gulf, the broader Arab world, and Europe. By contrast, Iran's economic engagement with the EU remains marginal, constrained by sanc-tions, regulatory barriers, and limited market access. Both trade and outward FDI are minimal, and inward EU FDI from Iran is almost negligible, reflecting the structural and geopolitical limits on economic interaction. This asymmetric pattern underscores the EU's differentiated engagement strategy, where the GCC and Saudi Arabia command priority, Iraq offers strategic but smaller-scale opportunities, and Iran functions largely as a constrained or excluded actor in current eco-nomic frameworks.

The overwhelming share of EU economic engagement with the GCC underscores the region's cen-trality to Brussels' strategic calculus. This dominance implies that EU policy should anchor re-gional initiatives in GCC-wide cooperation, leveraging the collective institutional and economic weight of member states to shape energy, infrastructure, and

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regulatory agendas. A focus on the GCC allows the EU to maintain regional legitimacy and influence while mitigating the risks of bilateral over-dependence.

Saudi Arabia's distinct economic footprint and growing inward FDI into Europe signal its role as a system-shaping actor. EU policy should treat the kingdom as both a commercial priority and a geopolitical interlocutor, integrating Saudi-specific initiatives—such as energy transition collabo-ration, high-tech investment, and financial partnerships—into broader Gulf strategies. This ap-proach also strengthens EU leverage in multilateral forums, enabling selective bilateral depth without undermining GCC cohesion.

Iraq's modest trade and FDI volumes contrast with its strategic positional importance. EU en-gagement should continue to support reconstruction, infrastructure, and capacity-building pro-grams, expanding economic interaction while stabilising the region. By investing in Iraq as a bridge between the Gulf, the Levant, and EU markets, Brussels enhances its role in regional con-flict prevention, energy security, and inter-Arab integration.

Iran's marginal economic profile reflects structural limitations due to sanctions and geopolitical frictions. For the EU, this necessitates a posture of normative containment coupled with selective engagement, maintaining channels for diplomacy and humanitarian trade while recognising that Iran cannot currently be integrated into the Gulf economic architecture. This highlights the need for differentiated strategies across the 3+1 framework rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The distribution of trade and investment underscores a multi-bilateral architecture in which the GCC provides regional legitimacy, Saudi Arabia offers bilateral depth, Iraq serves as a stabilising bridge, and Iran functions largely as a constrained reference point. EU policy should formalise this multi-layered approach, ensuring that economic, security, and diplomatic initiatives are mutually reinforcing yet tailored to each partner's characteristics.

The asymmetry in trade and FDI also indicates that the EU can employ investment and market access as levers to shape regional outcomes, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and technology. This alignment of economic engagement with geopolitical influence enables the EU to project normative and economic power without overextending politically. Minimal engagement with Iran further highlights the need for robust compliance frameworks to navigate sanctions while protect-ing legitimate trade. High dependence on GCC markets similarly calls for risk diversification and contingency planning, ensuring that EU exposure remains manageable in the event of geopolitical shocks.

Taken together, the 3 + 1 configuration reveals a clear prioritisation of differentiation over co-herence. The EU has opted for tailored bilateralism and flexible geometry rather than a unified Gulf doctrine. Within this structure, Saudi Arabia is quietly elevated above the GCC as a whole, operating on a higher strategic tier despite the absence of formal decoupling. Iraq emerges as an enabling partner, indispensable for stabilisation and mediation but marginal in agenda-setting. Iran, meanwhile, functions as the negative reference point around which much of the EU's Gulf posture is implicitly organised.

The Gulf Cooperation Council's internal diversity and institutional mechanisms have shaped the EU's engagement with the region beyond the dominant lenses of Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

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Qatar occupies a distinctive position as both a Gulf state with considerable financial resources and as a mediator in regional disputes. Its independent foreign policy, including mediation in conflicts such as the Yemen war and the Qatar–Saudi/UAE diplomatic crisis of 2017–2021, has enabled the EU to engage with Doha as a flexible partner for regional dialogue. In joint statements and mul-tilateral initiatives, Qatar's involvement often facilitates communication channels where Saudi–Emirati–Iran tensions would otherwise inhibit progress. Qatar's role is thus that of a bridge actor within the GCC, enabling the EU to pursue regional stabilisation while maintaining informal backchannels for conflict de-escalation.

EU and GCC

In its 2022 Joint Communication on a Strategic Partnership with the Gulf, the European Union declared that "The Gulf is a dynamic neighbouring region and an important gateway between Eu-rope, Asia and Africa" and that "the security and stability situation of the Gulf region bears direct consequences" for the EU's interests, positioning the Gulf as both a strategic partner and a region of shared mutual concern. (European External Action Service)

This explicit framing signified a major departure from decades of relatively diffuse engagement that had lacked an overarching strategic narrative. For the first time, the EU formally integrated the Gulf region into its external action architecture with political intention, articulating coopera-tion across six broad clusters, including trade and investment, climate action and energy, regional stability and security, humanitarian and development needs, reform and human rights, and institu-tional cooperation. (European Parliament)

The 2022 Communication's most significant achievement lies in its conceptual elevation of the Gulf from a collection of individual interlocutors to a region of shared strategic priority. By explicitly describing the region as a "gateway" and affirming its direct impact on EU security and prosperity, the Communication provided political legitimacy for deeper engagement and created a policy framework that has since been invoked in EU–GCC summitry, ministerial dia-logues, and the launch of Strategic Partnership Agreement negotiations with individual Gulf states. (European External Action Service)

The document also helped to operationalise cooperation, including calls for greater institutional engagement (e.g., opening EU delegations, structured dialogues on trade, green transition and se-curity) and introducing actions that extend beyond traditional economic links to encompass digi-tal connectivity, maritime safety, and people to people contact—areas previously underdevel-oped in EU–Gulf relations. (European External Action Service)

Moreover, the Communication's endorsement by the Council and its articulation in subsequent Joint Council statements and summit communiqués have sustained a political rhythm in EU Gulf engagement that had been missing since the 1989 Cooperation Agreement.

Despite these achievements, the 2022 Communication also exhibited notable limitations. First, its language, while comprehensive, remained broad and non binding, reflecting a diplomatic aspiration rather than an operational strategy with clear benchmarks. Critics both within and out-side EU institutions have observed that the document's expansive scope risks

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becoming a cata-logue of intentions rather than a focused set of actionable priorities, especially given differing Gulf interests and intra Gulf political fractures.

Second, the Communication's normative commitments—such as references to human rights, governance, and people to people contacts—have not yet translated into robust conditionality mechanisms. While human rights dialogues were envisaged, concrete linkage between strategic cooperation and values benchmarks has been weak in practice, diminishing the EU's normative leverage in a region where such issues are politically sensitive.

Third, operational follow through has been uneven. Although the Communication championed institutional depth, key measures—such as the opening of new EU delegations (e.g., in Oman) or the establishment of sustained regional security frameworks—have been slow or only partially implemented. (bic-rhr.com)

Finally, by framing the Gulf principally through the GCC construct, the Communication underes-timated bilateral dynamics and the distinct geopolitical orientations among Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman. This structural ambiguity has meant that while the Communication sets a regional frame, actual policy execution has tended toward differentiat-ed bilateralism, producing a more de facto than de jure strategic architecture.

EU Special Representative Luigi Di Mayo has emphasised that the EU's partnership with Gulf countries is "of utmost importance" because the region is a direct neighbour whose stability and prosperity intersect with European interests. He highlighted that mutual concerns in trade, securi-ty, energy, and innovation form the foundation of this engagement. By describing the Gulf as a neighbouring region, Di Maio operationalises the framing introduced in the 2022 Joint Communi-cation, which identified the Gulf as a dynamic region with direct consequences for EU security. His statement underscores a pragmatic, multi-sectoral approach that extends EU engagement be-yond economic cooperation to encompass broader geopolitical and technological domains. Di Moyo also stressed that both the EU and Gulf states can act as "pillars of stability," reflecting a normative commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based international order. This emphasis signals the EU's intent to distinguish its approach from other external actors that rely primarily on coercive or unilateral measures.

The statement demonstrates the practical uptake of the 2022 Communication's logic, showing that the EU views the Gulf as central to its external action objectives. It confirms that EU diplomacy seeks to combine security, development, and innovation in a coordinated partnership framework. At the same time, the language remains deliberately broad and non-prescriptive, leaving opera-tional mechanisms and conditionality underdeveloped. By framing both sides as "pillars of stabil-ity," the EU risks downplaying intra-Gulf divergences, including Iran-related security concerns and intra-GCC political fractures. The statement embodies an aspirational posture that prioritises engagement, dialogue, and normative multilateralism. However, it also reflects a persistent gap between strategic intent and strategic impact in a highly competitive and unstable regional envi-ronment. Overall, Di Mayo's articulation captures both the achievements and limitations of the EU's Persian Gulf policy since the 2022 Communication.

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In sum, the 2022 Joint Communication marked a qualitative advance in EU foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf, providing political legitimacy to a broad, multi thematic partnership and enabling subsequent high level engagements and negotiation frameworks. It succeeded in articu-lating the Gulf as a strategic gateway integral to EU interests. Yet its broad language, lack of clear implementation benchmarks, limited operational follow through, and weak normative condi-tionality underscore enduring challenges. As a foundational document, it set direction; as an exe-cutable strategy, it remains a work in progress—a necessary but insufficient step toward a coher-ent and impactful EU presence in the Gulf.

The United Arab Emirates has emerged as a Gulf actor combining economic dynamism with assertive regional foreign policy. In the EU's multi-bilateral calculus, the UAE represents a part-ner for commercial, energy, and technological cooperation, often in alignment with EU strate-gic interests such as renewable energy investment and port connectivity. However, in contrast to Qatar, its security posture—particularly in Yemen and maritime security in the Red Sea—places the UAE closer to Saudi Arabia's geopolitical orbit. EU communiqués increasingly treat the UAE both as part of collective Gulf diplomacy under the GCC framework and as an independent actor capable of bilateral agreements, reflecting its growing leverage in shaping regional security norms.

The EU–UAE Strategic Partnership Agreement is expected to institutionalise relations by creating a stable, long-term framework that goes beyond sector-by-sector cooperation. It signals a political upgrade of the relationship from pragmatic engagement to strategic alignment. For the EU, the SPA offers diversification of partnerships in a volatile global environment and deeper engagement with a key Gulf actor. For the UAE, it strengthens its positioning as a reliable global partner and gateway between Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Economically, the agreement is ex-pected to complement trade negotiations by improving regulatory dialogue, investment protection, and market predictability.

It should encourage higher levels of bilateral investment, including joint ventures and co-financing of large projects. Strategic sectors such as digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing are likely to be prioritised. Energy cooperation, particularly in re-newables, hydrogen, and decarbonisation technologies, is a core opportunity for both sides. The SPA also creates expectations for closer coordination on supply chains and economic security. From the EU perspective, cooperation supports its green transition and technological competitive-ness. From the UAE perspective, it supports economic diversification beyond hydrocarbons. On security and geopolitics, the agreement provides a platform for dialogue on regional stability, cri-sis management, and maritime security. It reflects shared interests in de-escalation, freedom of navigation, and protection of critical infrastructure. The SPA also reinforces cooperation in multi-lateral fora and global governance institutions. Humanitarian assistance and development coop-eration in third regions are likely areas of convergence. Institutional mechanisms under the SPA are expected to improve policy coordination and continuity over time. People-to-people ties, in-cluding education, research, and cultural exchange, are another anticipated benefit (Bianco, 2026). The agreement may enable triangular cooperation involving Europe, the Gulf, and neighbouring regions. It also allows the EU to engage the Gulf at a differentiated, bilateral level alongside GCC-wide frameworks. For the UAE, the SPA strengthens strategic autonomy by balancing relations with major global actors. Overall, expectations centre on a

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resilient, future-oriented partnership that combines economic opportunity with geopolitical relevance.

Oman provides the EU with a distinctly stabilising and low-profile channel. Traditionally, Oman has pursued a neutral and mediating foreign policy, maintaining relations with both Iran and the Gulf monarchies. Within EU strategy, Oman functions as a facilitator of indirect diplomacy, particularly in situations where direct engagement with Iran or intra-GCC disputes may be politi-cally sensitive. Its geographic position at the Strait of Hormuz also endows it with strategic im-portance, allowing the EU to consider maritime security and energy transit issues with a relatively low risk of political entanglement.

The GCC Secretariat, headquartered in Riyadh, plays a critical institutional role as the regional coordinating body. It provides the EU with a collective interlocutor, enabling multilateral policy dialogue, regional strategy alignment, and coordination across member states. Summit communi-qués and joint ministerial statements often reflect Secretariat input, particularly in framing issues such as collective security, counter-terrorism, and regional infrastructure projects. Nevertheless, the Secretariat's effectiveness is constrained by the divergence of member state priorities, exem-plified in historical disputes between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. For the EU, the Secretari-at serves as both a convening mechanism and a buffer for negotiating regional consensus, though it cannot replace the political weight of individual states in shaping Gulf outcomes.

The GCC Secretariat could be strengthened by expanding its mandate to include strategic plan-ning, policy harmonization, and long-term regional development initiatives beyond administrative coordination. It should enhance its analytical and research capabilities to provide member states with data-driven policy advice on security, economic diversification, and infrastructure projects. Investing in digital platforms and secure communication systems would improve information sharing, crisis response, and inter-agency coordination. Strengthening human capital through re-cruitment of specialized experts and continuous training would increase institutional professional-ism and capacity. Finally, creating mechanisms for accountability and performance evaluation, including regular reporting to member states, would ensure transparency, efficiency, and sustained commitment to collective GCC objectives.

Taken together, these actors illustrate the complex layering of the EU's Gulf engagement. Qatar and Oman function as stabilisers and mediators, the UAE operates as a commercial and security-oriented partner, and the GCC Secretariat provides the procedural framework for collective coor-dination. Their roles reinforce the EU's ability to pursue differentiated multi-bilateral policies: the GCC pillar remains legitimate as a collective reference, yet individual states can pursue stra-tegic partnerships that reflect their unique capacities and alignments. This dynamic allows the EU to balance regional legitimacy with targeted bilateral influence, while also navigating intra-GCC tensions that might otherwise hinder a cohesive European presence in the Gulf.

In summarising terms, the EU's current Persian Gulf posture is best understood as a multi-bilateral system in which the GCC provides regional legitimacy, Saudi Arabia supplies geopoliti-cal substance, Iraq offers stabilisation capacity, and Iran remains the excluded,

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sanction-bound counter-pole. This architecture maximises EU flexibility and diplomatic reach, yet it simultane-ously weakens strategic coherence, particularly with respect to regional security ordering. The evolution of summit statements thus portrays a Union that is present, differentiated, and norma-tively assertive, but increasingly constrained in its ability to integrate Iran into a collective and sustainable Gulf order.

The European Union's engagement with the Persian Gulf has largely revolved around energy secu-rity, counter-terrorism cooperation, and trade and investment relations, with the GCC–EU Coop-eration Agreement (1988) providing a loose framework for dialogue. EU imports from the Gulf remain dominated by hydrocarbons, which constituted nearly 18% of the EU's crude oil imports and 7% of its LNG imports in 2023. However, the EU's involvement has often been criticised for its narrow strategic focus and limited normative engagement, particularly on issues of human rights, labour rights, and political participation. This tension between strategic pragmatism and normative commitments constrains the EU's credibility as a transformative actor in the region. Without a more balanced approach that integrates principled diplomacy with strategic interests, the EU risks being perceived merely as an economic partner rather than a comprehensive geopolit-ical stakeholder capable of contributing to regional stability.

Summary

The Persian Gulf region stands as one of the most economically consequential subregions in the Middle East, underpinned by vast hydrocarbon reserves that have historically anchored both do-mestic political economies and international strategic interest. The six Gulf monarchies—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman—collectively hold around 30% of the world's proven oil reserves and 20% of global natural gas reserves, with Saudi Arabia alone accounting for approximately 17% of global crude oil production in 2023. This resource wealth has enabled them to accumulate significant sovereign wealth funds (for ex-ample, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund is valued at over $900 billion, while the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority exceeds $900 billion as well), positioning these states as major players in global capital flows and energy markets. Their political economies are increasingly shaped by ambitious economic diversification agendas, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Operation 300bn strategy, which aim to reduce dependence on hydrocarbons by expanding sectors like logistics, green energy, tourism, and high technology.

Security concerns remain a defining feature of the Gulf states' external orientation, with collec-tive defense seen as essential for safeguarding regime stability and strategic autonomy. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), founded in 1981, has served as the principal institutional platform for regional coordination, including joint military exercises, a planned integrated air defense sys-tem, and a Peninsula Shield Force of approximately 40,000 troops. Yet internal rifts—most no-tably the 2017–2021 Qatar diplomatic crisis—have revealed deep divergences in threat percep-tion and foreign policy orientation, complicating efforts to achieve cohesive security integration. These internal cleavages are further amplified by the enduring rivalry with Iran, which shapes much of the Gulf states' defense spending (collectively over $120 billion annually, led by Saudi Arabia at $75 billion, making it the world's fifth-largest military spender).

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In short, The 2022 Joint Communication did not constitute a Gulf strategy in the classical sense, but rather a strategic opening that enabled differentiated engagement. It marked the EU's transi-tion from sectoral and Iran-centric Gulf involvement toward a layered regional architecture, sub-sequently crystallising into a de facto 3 + 1 policy mix. Increasingly

Maghreb

The Maghreb, encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, represents the EU's closest geographical interface with the Arab world and forms a critical hinge between Eu-rope, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. The region is marked by shared historical legacies of colonialism and post-independence state-building, alongside divergent political trajectories and economic structures. Algeria and Libya are resource-dependent economies, together accounting for approximately 3.3% of global natural gas reserves and 2% of global oil output, while Mo-rocco and Tunisia are more diversified but face persistent structural unemployment and fiscal vulnerabilities. In demographic terms, the Maghreb is home to around 105 million people, nearly 25% of the Arab world's population, with a youth cohort (under 30) comprising over 55% of the population—making employment generation and socio-economic inclusion central challenges.

Economic interdependence with the European Union is the Maghreb's defining external feature. The EU is the region's largest trading partner, absorbing more than 55% of Maghreb exports and supplying roughly 45% of its imports as of 2023. Morocco and Tunisia have concluded As-sociation Agreements under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, while Algeria has a less opera-tional Association Agreement, and Libya remains outside any formal framework due to its ongo-ing political fragmentation. Morocco alone conducts over €45 billion annually in trade with the EU, with the bloc accounting for roughly 60% of Moroccan foreign direct investment inflows. These close ties are further institutionalised under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), through which the EU provides significant financial sup-port—over €7.4 billion allocated to the Southern Neighbourhood between 2021 and 2027.

Migration and mobility form another core dimension of EU–Maghreb relations. The region hosts over 6 million emigrants in EU member states, primarily from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, who generate substantial remittances (for example, remittances to Morocco exceeded €11 bil-lion in 2023, about 7.5% of GDP). EU policy increasingly links financial and trade cooperation to migration management, border security, and readmission agreements, reflecting a securitised turn in the EU's approach. However, this risk-driven framing has often overshadowed deeper structural engagement on governance reform, social development, and regional integration—despite the long-recognised need to revitalise the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which remains largely dormant. The Maghreb's internal fragmentation and uneven political reform trajectories compli-cate EU engagement, but they also highlight the strategic importance of a tailored approach that goes beyond migration control to support green transitions, education, industrial upgrading, and youth inclusion.

The rivalry between Algiers and Rabat, primarily over Western Sahara and border security issues, significantly affects European security by creating instability in the western Mediterranean and Sahel corridors, which are critical for migration, counterterrorism, and

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energy routes. Interaction patterns in the subregion evolve around bilateral distrust, proxy influence in Sahel states, and competition for regional leadership, limiting multilateral cooperation and reducing the effective-ness of subregional initiatives. For the EU, this rivalry complicates engagement, as Brussels must navigate conflicting Algerian and Moroccan interests while pursuing security, migration, and trade objectives in North Africa. It increases the EU's dependence on soft-power and diplomatic mediation, requiring nuanced balancing between development aid, security cooperation, and polit-ical dialogue. The Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA), while largely dormant, could play a latent role in facilitating dialogue, promoting economic integration, and institutionalizing frameworks for conflict resolution, but its effectiveness is constrained by the ongoing bilateral tension.

The relationship between France and Algiers plays a pivotal role in generating positive momen-tum in the Maghreb, as it can shape both political and economic dynamics across the region. Its effectiveness depends not only on bilateral diplomacy but also on multilateral structures, includ-ing DG MENA within the European Commission and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which provide platforms for coordination, funding, and regional projects. A strategic distribution of responsibilities—where France leverages political influence, DG MENA manages EU-level programming and funding, and the UfM facilitates project implementation and cross-border coop-eration—can enhance coherence and reduce duplication. This coordinated approach allows for targeted interventions in infrastructure, trade, and governance while signaling EU commitment to stability and integration in North Africa. Ultimately, aligning bilateral and multilateral instru-ments strengthens both France's influence and the EU's regional footprint, creating conditions for sustainable political and economic progress in the Maghreb.

UMA (Union du Maghreb Arabe) and Libya dynamics are characterized by political fragmenta-tion, limited institutional cohesion, and the predominance of bilateral over multilateral agendas. Libya's internal divisions and ongoing instability hinder UMA's ability to function as a cohesive regional actor, while member states often prioritize national security and economic interests over collective Maghreb initiatives. Competition for influence in Libya—particularly among Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—shapes UMA interactions, exposing the organization's structural weak-nesses and dependence on external mediation. Cross-border issues, including migration, arms flows, and energy transit, further complicate UMA's role, as Libya becomes both a challenge and a potential conduit for regional integration. Overall, UMA–Libya dynamics reflect a cycle of stalled institutional development, episodic cooperation, and strategic contestation that limits the organization's capacity to project collective influence in North Africa.

In this sense, the Maghreb embodies both the EU's greatest opportunity and its greatest test in the southern neighbourhood: it is the region where the EU's tools—trade, investment, regulatory ap-proximation, and mobility partnerships—are most developed, yet where the gap between norma-tive ambitions and on-the-ground impact remains most visible. Unlocking the Maghreb's potential as a stable, integrated, and prosperous partner will require the EU to recalibrate its approach, bal-ancing security imperatives with long-term socio-economic transformation and intra-regional co-operation.

Levant

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The Levant, comprising primarily Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Israel, occupies a strate-gically pivotal yet politically volatile space at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The region is defined by overlapping fault lines of protracted conflict, contested statehood, sectarian pluralism, and acute demographic pressures. It is home to a combined population of approximate-ly 80 million people, of whom more than 12 million are forcibly displaced—including 5.5 mil-lion registered Palestinian refugees and 5.2 million Syrian refugees across the wider Middle East, with Jordan and Lebanon hosting over 3 million between them. These demographic strains intersect with fragile economic structures: Lebanon's GDP has contracted by over 40% since 2018, Syria's economy remains devastated by civil war (with over 90% of the population in poverty), and Jordan faces chronic unemployment (around 21% overall, over 40% among youth) and water scarcity. Even Israel, the region's most advanced economy (GDP of $520 billion in 2023, high-tech accounting for over 15% of GDP), operates in a securitised environment shaped by recurrent conflict cycles with Palestinian territories and broader regional rivalries. Ge-netically, they draw on the same pool of DNA and at people-level this a story of continuity of presence and of one trunk with different branches.

The European Union and Israel cooperate across multiple policy domains based on shared eco-nomic interests, institutional ties, and long-standing technical collaboration. Over the past decade, trade and investment ties have grown steadily, with total bilateral trade in goods rising from ap-proximately €35.7 billion in 2016 to around €42.6 billion in 2024, making the EU Israel's largest trading partner. Services trade has also expanded, reaching roughly €25.6 billion in 2023, with EU exports to Israel exceeding imports. Foreign direct investment flows mirror this trend: EU FDI stock in Israel increased from about €58.3 billion in 2020 to €65.9 billion in 2023, while Israeli outward investment into the EU grew from roughly €60.1 billion in 2020 to €72.1 billion in 2023, reflecting deepening two-way economic integration.

Core pillars of cooperation include trade and economic relations under the EU–Israel Association Agreement, alongside industrial and regulatory collaboration aligned with EU standards. Research and innovation constitute one of the most advanced areas of engagement, notably through Israel's participation in EU Framework Programmes such as Horizon Europe, covering digital technolo-gies, AI, health, climate research, and advanced manufacturing. Cooperation also extends to digi-tal policy, cybersecurity, and innovation ecosystems. Energy, climate, and environmental collabo-ration has expanded, encompassing Eastern Mediterranean gas, renewables, hydrogen, energy ef-ficiency, water management, and sustainable agriculture. Transport and aviation cooperation is institutionalised through Israel's participation in the EU–Israel Common Aviation Area. The EU and Israel further engage in justice and home affairs, including counter-terrorism, border man-agement, organised crime prevention, and judicial cooperation. Security-related dialogue, foreign policy consultations, health policy cooperation, educational and cultural exchanges, and collabora-tion on development and humanitarian initiatives complete the framework of EU–Israel coopera-tion.

So long as Israel seeks security beyond Perfection and fails to reign in the dissident settlement movement, cooperation with the European Union will remain increasingly conditional, contested, and vulnerable to political and legal scrutiny, particularly in areas

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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linked to territorial governance, human rights compliance, and adherence to international law. This means both Israel and the EU have an inherent interest in the fight against bigotry, political extremism , religious fundamental-ism and political opportunism combined with policies on development of human capital, geo-graphical and sectoral integration as well as the political maturing of the party system.

Jordan occupies a highly strategic position in the Levant sub-system, acting as both a stabilizing intermediary and a regional buffer following the potential fall of Assad's regime in Syria. Its geo-graphic location—bordering Syria, Iraq, Israel, and the West Bank—places it at the crossroads of refugee flows, trade corridors, and security dynamics, making it a key partner for regional and extra-regional powers. Jordan serves as a critical conduit for Turkish influence into the Levant, providing Ankara with logistical access, political channels, and coordination platforms to shape post-Assad political and security outcomes. Its stability and governance capacity are crucial for containing extremism, managing refugee crises, and preventing spillover of conflict into neigh-boring states, reinforcing its importance to both the Gulf and Western partners. Ultimately, Jor-dan's role as a buffer and mediator enhances regional resilience, facilitates strategic cooperation, and positions the kingdom as an indispensable actor in shaping the Levant's post-conflict political order.

Jordan's trilateral engagements—such as Jordan–Iraq (Jo–IQ-EG), Saudi Arabia–Jordan–Syria (KSA–Jo–SYR), and Jordan–Palestinian Authority–Israel (Jo–PNA–Israel)—constitute a multidi-mensional strategic network that amplifies its role as a stabilizer and mediator in the Levant sub-system. These formats allow Jordan to coordinate security, economic, and diplomatic initiatives across borders, managing both conflict spillovers and opportunities for reconstruction. The EG-Jo–IQ trilateral links Jordan to Iraq's political and economic dynamics, facilitating energy transit, trade, and security cooperation against extremist threats, whereas Masr is an Arab top dog with whom Jordan trades and share a red sea coast with in the Gulf of Aqaba. The KSA–Jo–SYR trilat-eral provides a platform for Riyadh and Amman to influence post-Assad Syria, balancing Turkish, Iranian, and Russian regional ambitions. Meanwhile, the Jo–PNA–Israel trilateral ensures Jordan's centrality in Palestinian affairs, Jerusalem-related diplomacy, and cross-border stability, reinforc-ing its position as a key buffer and indispensable interlocutor for both regional powers and West-ern partners.

EU engagement with the Levant reflects this crisis-prone landscape, combining humanitarian re-lief, conflict mitigation, and developmental assistance rather than deep market integration. Jordan and Lebanon have Association Agreements with the EU and participate in the European Neigh-bourhood Policy (ENP), receiving substantial EU funding: the EU has committed over €3.4 billion to Jordan and €2.6 billion to Lebanon between 2016 and 2023, much of it directed toward refu-gee management, education, and basic services. The EU has also provided more than €30 billion in humanitarian and resilience aid to Syrians and host communities since 2011, positioning itself as the largest single donor to the Syria crisis. In Palestine, EU support is primarily chan-nelled through PEGASE and UNRWA, making the EU the largest donor to the Palestinian Au-thority, with annual contributions of around €300 million. By contrast, relations with Israel are highly advanced economically—with bilateral trade reaching €46 billion in 2023—yet politically constrained by tensions over the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, settlement expansion, and human rights concerns.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Unlike the Maghreb, the Levant lacks functioning regional integration mechanisms and is charac-terised by fragmented sovereignties, external interventions, and cyclical conflict. This has made the EU's approach largely reactive and crisis-driven, oriented around stability management rather than structural transformation. Yet this posture limits the EU's influence and risks perpetuating a cycle of dependency: heavy humanitarian spending has not translated into sustained institutional strengthening or economic revitalisation, while conditionality on governance reforms has been inconsistently applied due to fears of destabilisation. Looking ahead, a more strategic EU ap-proach to the Levant would require shifting from emergency relief to resilience-building—supporting long-term infrastructure reconstruction in Syria when conditions allow, investing in economic corridors and water-energy nexus projects across Jordan and Lebanon, and revitalising the moribund Middle East Peace Process through multi-track diplomacy and civil society support. Only by addressing the Levant's structural fragilities alongside its immediate crises can the EU contribute meaningfully to a sustainable regional order in this highly contested subregion.

Comparative Perspectives

While the Persian Gulf emphasizes security cooperation, strategic influence, and economic power as instruments to maintain regional stability, the Maghreb seeks to assert its autonomy vis-à-vis external actors and prioritizes socio-economic development, institutional strengthening, and intra-regional integration. In contrast, the Levant is marked by acute political fragmentation, protracted conflicts, and humanitarian crises, making conflict resolution, reconstruction, and resilience-building the primary imperatives. Each subregion exhibits distinct patterns of reliance on the Eu-ropean Union, shaped by historical legacies, contemporary challenges, and expectations of exter-nal support. Gulf states engage the EU primarily through energy trade, investment flows, and se-lective diplomatic partnerships, while Maghreb countries pursue deeper institutional and norma-tive convergence, and the Levant relies on the EU as a source of humanitarian aid, governance support, and crisis mediation.

The EU's approach to the Middle East must therefore navigate a highly heterogeneous landscape, in which regional perceptions, domestic priorities, and historical experiences interact with Euro-pean strategic and normative objectives. In the wake of the Ukraine war, the EU's dependency on energy imports from the Persian Gulf has heightened, prompting intensified engagement with Gulf states not only to secure energy supplies but also to counterbalance Iranian influence and prevent the consolidation of a potential Gulf monetary union. At the same time, significant un-tapped opportunities exist for the EU to facilitate cross-subregional cooperation: for example, linking Gulf investment capital with Maghreb infrastructure and green energy initiatives, or sup-porting Levantine reconstruction and resilience projects through regional economic corridors.

Ultimately, the perceptions, priorities, and strategic behaviours of the Persian Gulf, Maghreb, and Levant illustrate the complexity and multidimensionality of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Effective EU engagement requires a calibrated, context-sensitive approach that balances security, economic, and normative objectives; fosters inclusive dialogue; and recognizes the distinct characteristics and aspirations of each subregion. By tailoring its strategies to these differentiated dynamics while promoting selective interconnections, the EU can enhance its

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credibility and influence, con-tributing to long-term stability, development, and cooperative governance across the Middle East.

Comparative Overview of the Persian Gulf, Maghreb, and Levant

The Persian Gulf is characterized by its wealth derived from oil and gas, with states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait wielding considerable economic power. These countries maintain significant sovereign wealth and global investment influence, while their security orientation is focused on collective defense mechanisms through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and man-aging rivalry with Iran. EU engagement in the Persian Gulf is largely transactional, centred on energy imports—approximately 18% of the EU's crude oil and 7% of its LNG come from the Gulf—and investment partnerships, facilitated through the GCC–EU Cooperation Agreement. The EU's approach, however, gives limited attention to human rights and governance, reflecting a stra-tegic rather than normative focus. Strategic priorities for the Gulf states include ensuring energy security for the EU, maintaining regional influence and autonomy, counterbalancing Iran, and ad-vancing economic diversification and high-tech development.

The Maghreb, comprising Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, presents a mixed economic landscape, with resource-dependent economies such as Algeria and Libya alongside more diversified economies like Morocco and Tunisia. The region is home to approximately 105 million people, with a youth population under 30 representing more than 55 percent, and retains strong historical legacies from colonialism. Regional integration remains limited, with the Arab Maghreb Union largely inactive. The EU is the Maghreb's largest trading partner, accounting for over 55 percent of exports and around 45 percent of imports, and has developed institutional en-gagement through Association Agreements, the European Neighbourhood Policy, and the Union for the Mediterranean. Migration management and remittances also form a significant component of the relationship. Strategic priorities in the Maghreb focus on socio-economic development, youth inclusion, governance strengthening, institutional consolidation, intra-regional cooperation, and promoting green transitions and industrial upgrading.

The Levant, encompassing Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Israel, is marked by political fragmentation, protracted conflicts, and acute humanitarian needs. Its population of approximately 80 million includes around 12 million displaced persons, encompassing five and a half million Palestinian refugees and over five million Syrians. The EU's engagement in the Levant is domi-nated by humanitarian aid and crisis management, including more than €30 billion directed to-ward Syria, €3.4 billion for Jordan, and €2.6 billion for Lebanon, while Israel-EU trade is highly developed but constrained by political tensions. The European Neighbourhood Policy provides a framework for Jordan and Lebanon, though trade integration remains limited in the broader Le-vant. Strategic priorities here include conflict resolution, reconstruction, humanitarian resilience, governance support, economic recovery, infrastructure development, and multi-track diplomacy to enhance regional stability.

Across these three subregions, the degree of reliance on the EU varies according to historical ties, economic structures, and contemporary challenges. The Persian Gulf engages with the EU in transactional and energy-focused terms, the Maghreb seeks deeper institutional and

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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developmen-tal partnership, and the Levant depends primarily on humanitarian and governance support. A comprehensive EU strategy must therefore be sensitive to these differentiated dynamics, balanc-ing immediate security and humanitarian imperatives with longer-term objectives for economic development, governance, and cross-regional cooperation.

Table

Subregion	Key Characteristics	EU Engagement Patterns	Strategic Priorities
Persian Gulf	The Persian Gulf is defined by its oil and gas wealth, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait exercising substantial economic influence through sovereign wealth and global investment. The region maintains a strong security orientation, emphasizing collective defense through the GCC, while managing rivalry with Iran.	EU engagement is largely transactional, focusing on energy imports—approximately 18% of EU crude oil and 7% of LNG originate from the Gulf—and investment partnerships under the GCC–EU Cooperation Agreement. Attention to human rights and governance is limited.	Ensuring EU energy security, maintaining regional influence and autonomy, counterbalancing Iran, and advancing economic diversification and high-tech development.
Maghreb	Comprising Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, the Maghreb exhibits a mixed economic landscape. Resource-dependent economies coexist with more diversified ones, and the region has a population of roughly 105 million, with over 55% under 30. Historical legacies of colonialism persist, and regional integration mechanisms such as the Arab Maghreb Union are largely inactive.	The EU is the region's largest trading partner, accounting for over 55% of exports and around 45% of imports. Engagement occurs through Association Agreements, the European Neighbourhood Policy, and the Union for the Mediterranean. Migration management and remittances are significant factors.	Promoting socio-economic development and youth inclusion, strengthening governance and institutional frameworks, fostering intra-regional cooperation, and supporting green transitions and industrial upgrading.
Levant	The Levant includes Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Israel, and is marked by political fragmentation, conflict, and humanitarian crises. The population totals around 80 million, including approximately 12 million displaced persons.	EU engagement focuses on humanitarian aid and crisis management, including over €30 billion to Syria, €3.4 billion to Jordan, and €2.6 billion to Lebanon. Israel-EU trade is substantial but politically constrained. The ENP provides a framework for Jordan and Lebanon, while broader trade integration is limited.	Conflict resolution, reconstruction, humanitarian resilience, governance support, economic recovery, infrastructure development, and multi-track diplomacy to enhance regional stability.

Summary

The Persian Gulf engages the EU primarily through transactional energy and investment partner-ships, while the Maghreb pursues deeper institutional and developmental cooperation,

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and the Levant depends largely on humanitarian and governance support. These divergent patterns reflect the region's historical legacies, demographic and economic structures, and varying political and security challenges. Within this context, the EU maintains differentiated bilateral and multilateral relationships that require careful calibration. In Iraq, EU engagement focuses on reconstruction, stabilisation, and energy collaboration, seeking to support governance reforms while avoiding entanglement in local sectarian politics. Relations with Iran remain constrained by sanctions and the nuclear issue, yet the EU continues to act as a diplomatic interlocutor, balancing non-proliferation objectives with regional stability and energy considerations. Turkey represents a crit-ical partner at the EU's southeastern frontier, with ties encompassing migration management, trade, and security cooperation, though these relations are often complicated by divergent regional ambitions, including Turkey's influence in the Gulf and Levant. With Saudi Arabia, the EU priori-tises energy security, investment, and counter-terrorism cooperation, engaging through both bilat-eral channels and its formal interactions with the Gulf Cooperation Council, which serves as the principal platform for collective security coordination and dialogue with the EU.

These bilateral and multilateral relationships are increasingly shaped by China's expanding pres-ence in the region, including investments in ports, infrastructure, and energy projects across the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and the Maghreb. A rational EU response requires both strategic fore-sight and flexibility: maintaining strong transactional partnerships where energy and investment interests are paramount, deepening institutional and developmental ties where governance and structural reforms are feasible, and leveraging multilateral platforms such as the GCC–EU dia-logue to shape normative and security agendas. By combining tailored bilateral engagement, tar-geted multilateral cooperation, and selective cross-subregional initiatives, the EU can safeguard its interests, preserve strategic autonomy, and counterbalance external actors such as China while promoting regional stability, sustainable development, and inclusive governance across the Mid-dle East. Examining these sub-systems through this lens highlights internal alignments, friction points, and the mechanisms by which influence is projected across borders. These dynamics provide a crucial context for understanding energy trade, the impact of external actors such as China, and the stra-tegic calculations of regional powers like Iran, Iraq, and Turkey.

4.0 THE EU'S ENERGY TIES

The European Union (EU) and the Gul Corporation Council (GCC) have a longstanding partner-ship, formalized by a 1989 corporation Agreement, focused on economic relations, energy, cli-mate change, and research.Their relationship is expanding, with the recent introduction of bilat-eral Strategic Partnership Agreements to boost trade, investment, and corporation on shared goals like economic diversification and tackling security challenges. Despite an increase in high level enhgagement and strategic momentum, the partnership faces challenges in balancing the EU's multilateral approach with GCC's state-led framework.

The key aspects of the relation is economic and strategic engagement. The GCC between them-selves holds the worst largest oil reserves with clear potential to deepen the relationship by trade and investment in order to promote economic growth and diversification in the GCC. The first EU-GCC Summit was held in 2024 and you will find the conlusions in the appendices.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The focus areas are the economy, energy and climate, research & innovation, security and stability and digitalization. The Eu is seeking to renew the orporation agreements to reflect the evolution in trade across prioritized areas. The EU is applying a dual track diplomacy, a flexible one that al-lows for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation, tailoring engagement to meet the ambition of both sides.

The challenges are linked to diverging approaches, global shifts and the focus on concrete pro-jects. A central challenge is reconciling the EU's preference for structured multilateral frame-works with the GCC's more flexible state-led approach. Geopolitical shifts and regional instabil-ity have spurred increased engagement, creating both opportunities and limitations for deeper strategic alignment. Future progress depends on identifying and aligning on concrete projects that leverage converging interests.

Energy trade forms a foundational pillar of the Middle East's political economy, reflecting both leverage and dependency among regional and external actors. Within the framework of regional sub-systems, energy flows serve as both connectors and points of contention, shaping alliances, rivalries, and economic interdependence. For the European Union, engagement with Gulf coun-tries is increasingly framed through the "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf," which seeks to combine trade, investment, and energy cooperation with broader objectives of regional stability and security. This partnership operates at the intersection of economic imperatives and geopoliti-cal strategy, as energy resources remain instruments of influence and markers of vulnerability.

Several assumptions underpin this analysis. First, the international system continues to be shaped by raw power politics, where economic assets and resources are routinely leveraged for political advantage. In this context, energy trade is inseparable from security considerations, and shifts in production, pricing, or access can have strategic repercussions. Second, the EU and the Gulf to-gether account for approximately 20 percent of global GDP, emphasizing the scale and potential impact of coordinated energy and economic policies. Third, the existing multi-bilateral policy architecture, encompassing EU-GCC, member-state, and sector-specific initiatives, is often frag-mented and inefficient, limiting the ability to translate political ambition into operational out-comes.

Within this complex environment, external influences further shape the energy landscape. China's growing economic and infrastructural presence in the Gulf interacts with EU–Gulf energy dynam-ics, introducing new investment flows, technological cooperation, and competition for strategic leverage. Concurrently, Iran's subregional schemes create additional pressures, as energy trade and transport routes are affected by political alignments, security considerations, and regional rivalries. The EU's energy engagement thus must navigate these overlapping layers, balancing economic cooperation, political stability, and strategic foresight.

Ultimately, a coherent EU–Gulf energy strategy can strengthen mutual benefits. Enhanced cooper-ation can support European energy security, facilitate economic diversification and sustainable growth in Gulf states, and serve as a platform for broader political and security dialogue. By situ-ating energy trade within the framework of sub-systems, external influence, and regional strate-gies, the EU and its Gulf partners can leverage their combined economic

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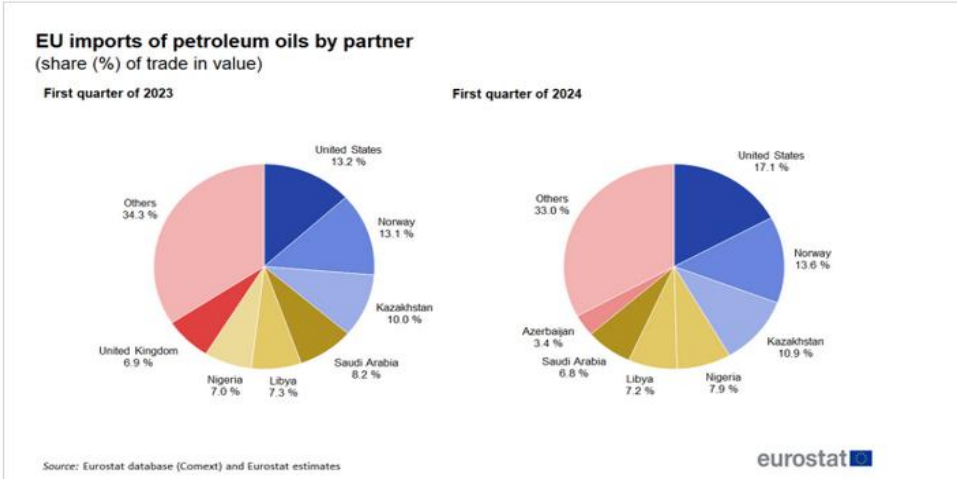
weight to shape global energy markets, advance regional stability, and manage geopolitical risk.

Figure 2 - EU oil imports



Source: Eurostat

Strengthening EU–Gulf relations require enhancing early warning systems, intelligence capabili-ties, and secure communication channels. Addressing hybrid threats, cyber diplomacy, foreign information manipulation, terrorism, and promoting disarmament are essential components of this effort.

The EU faces several challenges in its engagement with the Gulf region. Security and stability remain sensitive issues due to ongoing conflicts, terrorism, and proxy wars, making the manage-ment of regional tensions a constant challenge. Human rights and democratic reforms also pose difficulties; the EU seeks to balance economic interests with advocacy for democratic change, which can strain relations with Gulf partners. Economically, Gulf states remain heavily reliant on oil and gas, making diversification and sustainable growth a priority. Environmental concerns, including water scarcity and rising temperatures, require collaboration on climate action. Migra-tion and labor issues are also central, as migrant workers play a significant role in Gulf econo-mies, making the protection of their rights a shared responsibility.

These challenges call for proactive dialogue, cooperation, and strategic engagement. The Europe-an Union Special Representative, Di Maio, is conducting consultations to make the EU Persian Gulf strategy more operational, aiming to enhance coordination on regional and global stability and security, and to develop mechanisms that unify GCC and EU member states' approaches across various issues.

Addressing security concerns requires a multifaceted strategy. Diplomatic engagement through regular dialogue fosters understanding, trust, and peaceful conflict resolution. Regional coopera-tion, including intelligence sharing, counterterrorism collaboration, maritime security, and joint military exercises, strengthens coordination among partners. Promoting arms control and non-proliferation prevents escalation of regional tensions.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Cybersecurity efforts are vital to counter hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns, and cyberattacks. Preparedness for humanitarian crises, whether from natural disasters or conflicts, demands coordinated relief and assistance. Supporting conflict prevention initiatives and encouraging economic diversification further contribute to re-gional stability. Sustained engagement, trust-building, and a long-term perspective are essential to address these challenges effectively.

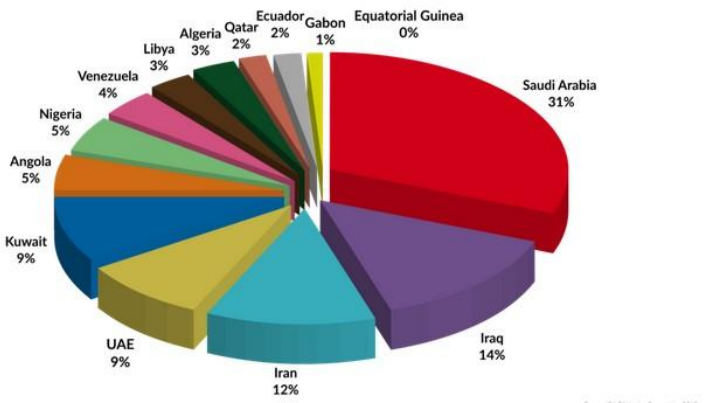
Enhancing regional cooperation also involves strengthening economic and social ties. Trade and investment partnerships, joint ventures, technology transfer, and business exchanges can deepen economic relations. Cultural and educational exchanges, including student mobility, academic collaboration, and cultural events, foster mutual understanding. Security cooperation, as previous-ly noted, remains critical. Environmental sustainability efforts, such as joint action on climate change and water scarcity, support long-term regional resilience. Cooperation on health and pan-demic preparedness, including research and infrastructure development, ensures readiness for fu-ture crises. Continuous political dialogue and conflict resolution initiatives maintain open chan-nels for negotiation and collaboration.

Sustained engagement, trust-building, and commitment to shared goals underpin successful re-gional cooperation. The first EU-GCC Summit in mid-October 2024 provided an opportunity for stock-taking and reaffirmed the importance of these approaches in promoting stability, security, and development in the Gulf region.

These challenges necessitate proactive measures such as dialogue, cooperation, and strategic engagement between the EU and Gulf countries. The EUSR di Maio is currently conducting consultations on how to make the EU Persian Gulf strategy more operational “ to continue enhancing coordination on issues related to regional and global stability and security […] and develop new mechanisms for cooperation would contribute to unifying the views of the GCC and EU member states on various issues and files” .

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is by far the world’s biggest exporter of energy products, while Iraq has the second largest deposits, trailed by Iran, UAE and Kuwait.

Figure 3 – The World’s largest oil exporters



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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

The spatial and political distribution of resources illustrates how economic interdependence shapes strategies and alliances. When considered alongside sub-system dynamics, energy flows reveal the channels through which influence is exerted, particularly in relation to Iranian subre-gional schemes and the engagement strategies of the EU and Turkey.

5.0 CHINA'S MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY

China is by far Iran's biggest trading partner taking 46% of Iran's exports, followed by India (19%), Turkey (17%), and Japan (10%). China wants to be a powerful nation and is increasingly present in the Middle East for reasons of self-image, economic profit such as arms sales and for reasons of interests closer to home. Its main energy partners: Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and UAE. The Sino-Iranian relations are hampered by Iran being a major threat to regional stability and security, by Iran's status as an exporter of terrorism, and for reasons Iran clandestinely seeks to procure technology for mass destruction, and a large and thriving arms trade

China's Middle East strategy is guided by strategic, economic, and political objectives. The pri-mary goals include securing stable access to oil and natural gas to sustain China's growing energy needs and industrial base, particularly from Gulf states, Iraq, and Iran. Economic expansion is an-other objective, encompassing trade growth, infrastructure investment under the Belt and Road Initiative, and access to regional markets for Chinese companies. Strategically, China seeks to gain geopolitical leverage to balance U.S. and Western influence, while also projecting itself as a global power. Stability and security are emphasized through partnerships that preserve critical supply chains and maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz. Diplomatic prestige is pursued by positioning China as a mediator in regional disputes and showcasing a governance model based on sovereignty and non-interference.

The primary means China employs to achieve these objectives include energy leverage, arms trade, trade and investment, diplomatic engagement, and technology transfer. China has moved from being a commercial oil buyer to strategically investing in upstream oil and gas projects across the Middle East, securing long-term contracts and stakes in pipelines, refineries, and explo-ration. Arms exports, including military hardware, drones, and surveillance technologies, provide security assistance to multiple actors, allowing China to exert influence without formal alliances. Trade and investment, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, create economic interde-pendence that translates into soft power, while high-level diplomatic engagements and mediation roles in conflicts such as the Iran nuclear dialogue or Israeli-Palestinian tensions bolster prestige. The export of telecommunications, AI, and surveillance technology further strengthens China's influence by shaping regional modernization and governance models.

The evolution of China's strategy in the region can be divided into three phases. In the 1990s and 2000s, the focus was on resource security, with energy imports and contracts ensuring stable sup-ply chains in a transactional, risk-managed manner. By the 2010s, with the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's engagement shifted toward creating a strategic economic footprint, converting trade and investment into structural influence, and integrating oil trade into broader interdependence rather than treating it as a standalone goal.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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In the 2020s, China increasingly pro-jects itself as a neutral mediator and strategic partner, using energy, trade, and arms to gain dip-lomatic prestige, policy influence, and security partnerships, while avoiding formal military en-tanglements. Influence has become more soft, structural, and reputational rather than coercive.

Overall, China's approach is multi-dimensional, combining hard economic tools with soft power. By moving from simple energy leverage to prestige-oriented influence, Beijing has embedded itself into the political, economic, and technological infrastructure of the Middle East. The long-term challenge lies in balancing relationships among rival regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran or Israel and Palestine, without becoming militarily entangled, while continuing to lever-age trade, investment, and arms for strategic advantage.

Building on this, China's approach contrasts sharply with traditional U.S. and EU strategies in the Middle East, which have historically combined economic interests with security guarantees, mili-tary presence, and political conditionalities. While Washington and Brussels often link trade, aid, and investment to governance reforms, security cooperation, or alignment with broader strategic objectives, China prioritizes pragmatic economic engagement and infrastructure development, frequently avoiding overt political pressure. This allows Beijing to operate as a perceived neutral actor, cultivating relationships across rivalries, from Iran and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

By focusing on long-term infrastructural and economic footprints rather than short-term military deployments, China not only ensures energy access but also gains leverage in shaping regional supply chains, connectivity networks, and industrial development. This generates both tangible benefits—such as ports, transport corridors, and joint energy projects—and intangible advantages, including diplomatic influence, reputational prestige, and the capacity to mediate disputes. Over time, these combined effects position China as a central node in the Middle East's evolving eco-nomic and political architecture, capable of advancing strategic objectives without the risks and costs associated with direct military involvement.

Ultimately, China's model demonstrates how economic power, connectivity, and soft influence can substitute for hard power in creating durable regional sway, offering a template for external actors seeking to engage the Middle East in ways that prioritize stability, development, and pres-tige over coercion.

China's Rise in the Gulf: Building Blocks and Strategic Implications

China's growing presence in the Gulf and wider Middle East is shaped by multiple, interrelated building blocks that extend beyond prestige to tangible influence and power projection. At the core, China pursues economic integration through infrastructure investment, energy contracts, and trade partnerships. Major projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), port develop-ments, and energy deals allow China to embed itself in critical regional supply chains, creating long-term dependencies that translate into leverage.

A second pillar is technological and financial engagement. China exports digital infrastructure, telecommunications (e.g., 5G networks), and financial instruments that bind

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Gulf economies to Chinese systems. This creates both operational influence and strategic visibility, enabling Beijing to shape regulatory and commercial norms in its favor.

Third, China leverages diplomatic and soft power tools, including high-level state visits, cultural exchanges, and multilateral forums, to cultivate prestige and legitimacy. While prestige remains a goal—enhancing China's image as a responsible, capable global actor—its investments and part-nerships generate practical influence that can be mobilized in regional negotiations, energy gov-ernance, and security cooperation indirectly.

Finally, China's energy security strategy is a critical driver. Securing reliable oil and gas sup-plies through long-term contracts and infrastructure investments allows China to reduce exposure to global market volatility while gaining strategic footholds across key energy corridors. This ap-proach simultaneously strengthens its negotiating position with Gulf producers and offers lever-age in regional diplomacy.

Taken together, these building blocks show that China's approach in the Gulf is not solely about prestige. While symbolic recognition and international status matter, the combination of econom-ic, technological, diplomatic, and energy initiatives provides China with concrete instruments of influence and power. Through these mechanisms, Beijing can affect regional economic dependen-cies, partially shape security dynamics, and gain indirect leverage over regional sub-systems, in-cluding energy flows, trade networks, and multilateral policy arenas.

In short, China's rise in the Gulf represents a deliberate blend of prestige and practical power, where image-building supports—and is reinforced by—material influence across economic, tech-nological, and strategic domains.

Strategic Dynamics in the Gulf: China, the EU, and Regional Sub-Systems

China's growing presence in the Gulf is structured around multiple, mutually reinforcing building blocks that extend beyond prestige to tangible influence and power projection. Economically, China integrates itself into regional infrastructure, trade, and energy networks, particularly through Belt and Road Initiative projects, port investments, and long-term energy contracts. These engagements create dependencies and leverage, embedding China in the operational and strategic fabric of the Gulf. Technologically and financially, China exports telecommunications systems, digital infrastructure, and financial services that increase its visibility and influence while shaping regional norms. Diplomatically and culturally, Beijing cultivates prestige through state visits, multilateral forums, and soft power initiatives, reinforcing legitimacy while enabling practical influence in regional negotiations. Securing energy supplies remains central: long-term contracts and investments in energy corridors reduce China's market exposure and provide strategic foot-holds, translating economic integration into bargaining power. Collectively, these building blocks illustrate that China's Gulf engagement is a blend of prestige and practical power, with real impli-cations for regional sub-systems, energy flows, and multilateral dynamics.

Energy trade forms a foundational pillar of the Gulf's political economy and a key domain where EU engagement intersects with these dynamics. The EU's "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf" seeks to combine trade, investment, and energy cooperation with broader objectives of regional stability and security. Energy flows are not only economic assets but instruments

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

of influence; shifts in production, pricing, or access can carry geopolitical weight. Several assumptions frame this approach: global politics remains power-driven, where resources are instrumentalized; the EU and Gulf together account for roughly 20 percent of global GDP; and the current multi-bilateral EU–GCC policy architecture is fragmented, limiting operational effectiveness. Despite these structural challenges, the EU can strengthen energy security, support Gulf economic diversifica-tion, and provide a platform for political dialogue, situating energy trade at the intersection of economic and strategic priorities.

Iran's subregional schemes add another layer of complexity. Through alliance-building, influence projection, and coordination with neighboring states, Iran shapes energy corridors, trade networks, and regional alignments. These dynamics directly interact with both China's economic penetration and EU–Gulf energy strategies, creating overlapping spheres of influence that regional actors must navigate. Iraq, Turkey, and the EU exemplify multi-level engagement: domestic governance, regional alignments, and external partnerships intersect, highlighting how energy, economic, and security considerations are inseparable from broader strategic calculations.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate the interwoven nature of Gulf dynamics. China lever-ages infrastructure, technology, and energy to build both prestige and practical influence. The EU seeks to strengthen energy and trade cooperation while promoting stability and strategic dialogue. Iran projects subregional power, and regional actors like Iraq and Turkey negotiate among these intersecting currents. Understanding energy trade, external influence, and sub-system interactions in this integrated framework allows for a coherent assessment of both opportunities and con-straints, revealing where policy interventions and strategic partnerships can most effectively ad-vance stability, economic development, and security in the Gulf region.

Policy Implications

The analysis of China's rise, EU engagement, and regional sub-systems in the Gulf suggests sev-eral actionable priorities. First, the EU should strengthen strategic energy and trade partnerships, leveraging its combined economic weight with Gulf states to enhance stability, support economic diversification, and ensure secure energy flows. Second, cooperation on infrastructure, technolo-gy, and digital standards should be coordinated to provide alternatives to unilateral external influ-ence, particularly in areas where China's investments create long-term dependencies. Third, dip-lomatic engagement and multilateral dialogue must be sustained to manage tensions arising from overlapping spheres of influence, including Iran's subregional strategies. Finally, integrating secu-rity, economic, and energy considerations into a holistic EU–Gulf approach will improve coordi-nation, prevent fragmentation, and enable the EU to exert meaningful influence while reinforcing regional stability.

By pursuing these priorities, the EU can balance the dual imperatives of responding to China's expanding presence and promoting regional resilience, creating conditions for more effective co-operation and strategic foresight across the Gulf.

Figure 4 - China's trading position in the Eu's Southern near abroad

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Source: https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/03/the-potential-inroads-and-pitfalls-of-chinas-foray-into-middle-east-diplomacy?lang=en

China's policy posture in the Gulf and Mediterranean is increasingly proactive, combining trade, investment, and infrastructure diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing emphasizes economic engagement over direct political intervention, positioning itself as a reliable partner for energy security, port development, and logistics networks across the region. Its growing commercial footprint enhances China's strategic leverage, allowing it to influence regional supply chains, energy flows, and maritime trade corridors without direct security entanglements. For Gulf and Mediterranean states, China's presence diversifies trading partners and investment sources, reducing dependency on traditional Western allies while accelerating economic modernization. The implications include heightened regional competition, new opportunities for economic integration, and a subtle reshaping of geopolitical alignments around trade and infrastructure networks rather than traditional military alliances.

6.0 IRAN's SUB-REGIONAL SCHEME

Iran's grand strategy is centered on regime survival and strategic autonomy. It seeks to preserve the Islamic Republic in a hostile regional and international environment. A core pillar is re-sistance to U.S. influence in the Middle East. Iran frames this resistance both ideologically and pragmatically. Its experience in the Iran-Iraq War and decades of sanctions shaped this approach. Tehran avoids direct confrontation when possible, preferring long-term attrition strategies. Iran projects influence through regional proxies like Hezbollah and militias in Iraq and Syria. These groups extend Iran's reach without conventional military deployment. The country also builds alliances with major powers such as Russia and China. These relationships hedge against West-ern sanctions and political pressure. Iran pursues regional security initiatives to propose alterna-tives to U.S.-led frameworks. Military deterrence is crucial, including ballistic missiles and na-val capabilities. Iran maintains strategic ambiguity regarding its nuclear program for leverage. Flexibility underpins its diplomacy, balancing confrontation and negotiation. Iran engages with regional rivals when pragmatic, as seen in recent Saudi dialogues. Economic resilience is promot-ed through the

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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"resistance economy" strategy. This approach focuses on domestic production and reduced dependence on oil exports. Iran's grand strategy integrates political, military, and eco-nomic tools cohesively.

The overall aim is to maximize influence, deter adversaries, and protect sovereignty.In sum, Iran combines resistance, alliances, deterrence, and adaptability to safeguard its regime and regional ambitions.

The Persian Gulf plays a central and multifaceted role in Iran's foreign policy, serving as both a strategic buffer and a projection zone for influence.

The Gulf is Iran's immediate maritime frontier, and control over its southern littoral and key waterways is critical for national security. The Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-third of global oil trade passes, is especially vital; Iran sees it as both a leverage point against adversaries and a deterrent against military threats.

Regionally, the Gulf is a theater for Iran's power projection through alliances with local actors such as militias in Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen, as well as support for political factions aligned with Tehran. This network extends Iran's influence without requiring direct conventional military de-ployments, enabling a cost-effective asymmetric strategy.

Iran's foreign policy also emphasizes maritime defense and deterrence, maintaining fast-attack naval vessels, coastal missile batteries, and patrol forces capable of threatening strategic choke-points if necessary. These capabilities reinforce Iran's broader deterrence posture in the Gulf.

Economically, the Persian Gulf underpins Iran's oil and gas exports, making security and stabil-ity in the region a direct national interest. Iran's strategy combines regional alliances, deter-rence, and economic leverage to safeguard energy flows and sustain revenue under sanctions.

Politically, the Gulf allows Iran to shape regional norms and institutions, promoting initiatives like the Hormuz Peace Endeavor as alternatives to Western-led frameworks, while simultaneously countering U.S. and Gulf Arab influence.

In sum, the Persian Gulf is both a strategic heartland and a projection space for Iran. Its foreign policy in the Gulf integrates security, economic, and diplomatic tools, aiming to secure national survival, expand regional influence, and maintain leverage over global energy markets.

Figure

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International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The infographic visually represents how Iran integrates security, economic, and diplomatic instruments to pursue its Persian Gulf strategy. At the center is Iran, highlighted in green, with the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz as the strategic focal point. Arrows radiate from Iran to three main strategic layers.

The security and military layer shows Iran's use of deterrence and defense. Key elements include control of the Strait of Hormuz, naval and missile capabilities, and asymmetric warfare. The aim is to prevent hostile incursions, deter regional adversaries, and project power without large-scale conventional deployments.

The economic interests layer highlights the Gulf's importance for oil and gas exports. Iran lever-ages its energy resources for economic resilience, particularly under sanctions. Maintaining ener-gy security and uninterrupted trade through the Strait is vital for regime stability and revenue gen-eration.

The diplomatic and influence layer emphasizes Iran's alliances, regional initiatives, and proxy networks. Through programs like the Hormuz Peace Plan, Iran seeks to offer alternatives to U.S.-led regional structures. Support for allied actors and engagement with neighboring states extends influence while minimizing direct confrontation. The arrows connecting the circles to Iran and the Gulf illustrate how security, economic, and dip-lomatic tools are mutually reinforcing. For example, deterrent military capabilities support both economic interests by securing oil flows and diplomatic influence through credible leverage.

The infographic demonstrates that the Persian Gulf is not just a geographic region but a strategic theater. Iran's foreign policy in the Gulf blends hard power, economic leverage, and soft power influence to ensure regime survival, strategic autonomy, and regional projection.

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It shows a coher-ent framework: protect the core, leverage resources, and shape the environment.

In 2019, Iran launched the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE), positioning it as a regional dialogue forum designed to enhance cooperation and stability among the countries surrounding the Persian Gulf. Framed as an initiative to promote peace, security, and prosperity, HOPE emphasizes freedom of navigation, energy security, and conflict prevention. The proposal is anchored in international law, with particular reference to the responsibilities of regional states under the UN Charter to maintain peace and stability, as well as UNSC Resolution 598, which highlights the shared interest of neighboring states in the safety of maritime navigation and regional security. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif presented the initiative during a special session of the UN Security Council, underlining Iran's desire to seek international legitimacy and multilateral engagement for the effort.

HOPE's plan of action is ambitious, encompassing both diplomatic and operational components. It envisages the organization of a summit involving the eight littoral nations of the Persian Gulf, with the possibility of including Yemen at a later stage. This summit would address issues of se-curity and cooperation, including energy security, arms control, and confidence-building measures. Complementing the summit, HOPE proposes the creation of a joint taskforce to facili-tate collaboration in practical areas such as early warning systems, conflict resolution, combating drug trafficking, energy investments, and cybersecurity. The initiative is built upon foundational principles of dialogue, mutual respect, sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, and rejection of aggression, reflecting an aspiration to institutionalize a regional framework that balances national interests with collective security.

The strategic relevance of HOPE can also be understood in the context of Iran's economic foot-print in the region. Iran is a major trading partner for Iraq, supplying approximately 25 percent of its imports, equivalent to around $12 billion out of Iraq's total $42 billion annual imports. Beyond Iraq, Iran exports to key markets including China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Oman, and Thailand, while importing mainly from the UAE, China, Turkey, India, Germany, and Russia. This trade interdependence highlights how economic linkag-es underpin Iran's ability to shape regional cooperation frameworks, including initiatives such as HOPE.

Responses to HOPE have been varied across regional and international actors. Oman, drawing on its historical role as a neutral mediator in Gulf affairs, has expressed support for the initiative, seeing it as a potential mechanism to enhance regional stability. Kuwait has similarly welcomed the proposal, emphasizing the importance of diplomatic efforts to manage tensions. The United States, however, has been cautious, acknowledging the value of dialogue while insisting that broader concerns regarding Iran's regional behaviour and nuclear programme be addressed. Saudi Arabia remains wary, reflecting the deep-seated Saudi-Iranian rivalry that complicates coopera-tive initiatives, while the United Arab Emirates has not adopted a clear stance, balancing econom-ic ties with security apprehensions. The European Union has encouraged dialogue and de-escalation, viewing HOPE positively but emphasizing the need for concrete confidence-building measures. China and Russia have expressed support for diplomatic solutions and multilateral en-gagement, framing the initiative as aligned with their broader interest in regional stability and opposition

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to unilateral coercive measures. These responses remain dynamic, with ongoing dip-lomatic interactions likely to shape the extent and character of engagement with HOPE.

Despite its aspirations, the implementation of HOPE faces significant challenges. A deep-rooted trust deficit, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, complicates efforts to build cooperative frameworks. The region's security environment—including maritime incidents, proxy conflicts, and missile proliferation—poses operational hurdles for any multilateral initiative. Furthermore, regional rivalries and competition for influence between major Gulf powers threaten to undermine consensus, requiring careful navigation to prevent escalation. Addressing these barriers demands a combination of sustained diplomatic engagement, practical cooperation measures, and incremen-tal trust-building, reflecting lessons from prior regional dialogue mechanisms such as the Samar-kand Dialogue and broader UN-facilitated processes.

The United Nations plays a pivotal role in providing legitimacy, coordination, and oversight for regional initiatives such as the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE). By anchoring the initiative with-in the framework of international law, including references to the UN Charter and relevant Securi-ty Council resolutions, the UN helps establish shared norms and expectations for state behaviour, particularly regarding sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, and maritime security. Participa-tion by the UN also signals to regional and global actors that HOPE is not solely a bilateral or uni-lateral effort by Iran, but a multilateral framework grounded in internationally recognized princi-ples.

The role of the United States in Gulf security remains a defining factor for any regional initiative, including HOPE. The U.S. exerts significant influence through military presence, security guaran-tees for Gulf allies, and strategic partnerships with key regional actors. While its involvement can provide a stabilizing effect, it also introduces complex dynamics, as regional states must navigate the alignment of their own interests with broader U.S. policies and concerns. Differences in priori-ties—ranging from countering Iranian influence to ensuring energy security—can complicate con-sensus-building and create friction within multilateral frameworks.

At the same time, HOPE's multilateral character introduces additional challenges. The initiative encompasses multiple stakeholders with varying historical grievances, strategic ambitions, and domestic political constraints. Coordinating actions, aligning commitments, and fostering a shared sense of responsibility require skilful and continuous diplomacy. Success depends not only on formal agreements but also on the capacity to manage informal channels, build trust over time, and reconcile competing priorities. The complexity of these interactions underscores the delicate balance necessary to transform aspirational principles into concrete, sustainable outcomes for the region.

Beyond legal legitimacy, the UN can facilitate practical mechanisms for dialogue, conflict pre-vention, and confidence-building. Through its specialized agencies and envoys, it can provide technical expertise in areas such as maritime safety, energy security, humanitarian support, and early warning systems. UN involvement also serves as a platform for monitoring compliance, me-diating disputes, and convening regional stakeholders who might otherwise be reluctant to engage directly with one another. By linking regional initiatives to broader

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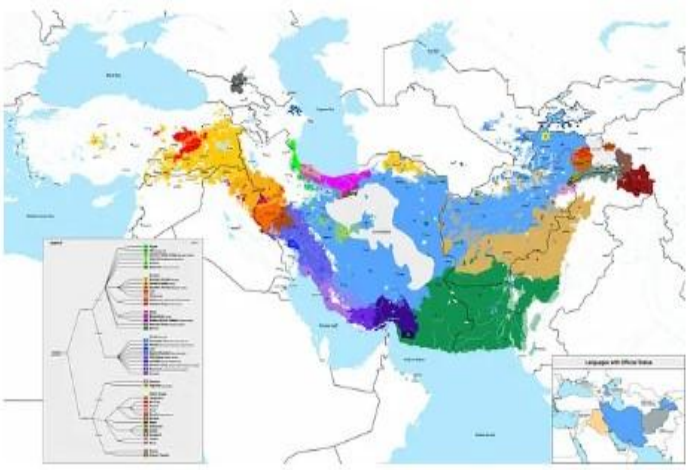
global norms, the UN thus acts as both a stabilizing anchor and a conduit for international support, reinforcing the credibility and potential effectiveness of efforts like HOPE in an otherwise contested and highly securitized envi-ronment.

In sum, HOPE represents both an opportunity and a challenge: an effort to anchor Persian Gulf security in dialogue, legal norms, and regional collaboration, while contending with historical rivalries, economic interdependencies, and the strategic interests of global powers. Its success hinges on the ability of participating states to combine aspirational principles with pragmatic im-plementation and sustained confidence-building.

The implementation of the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) faces multiple, interrelated challeng-es that extend across economic, geopolitical, and historical dimensions. Economic interests repre-sent a central factor, as the Gulf region is deeply intertwined through trade, energy resources, and critical maritime routes. Initiatives aimed at enhancing security must therefore be carefully bal-anced with the imperative to maintain economic cooperation and ensure the uninterrupted flow of energy exports and imports. Misalignment between security priorities and economic incentives could undermine trust among regional actors and weaken the effectiveness of multilateral frameworks.

External influence constitutes another significant challenge. Global powers, including China, Rus-sia, the European Union, and the United States, each have distinct strategic and economic stakes in the Gulf, shaping the environment in which HOPE seeks to operate. Constructive engagement with these actors is essential to avoid interference that could destabilize the initiative or create compet-ing agendas. Securing international buy-in, particularly through diplomatic channels and coordi-nation with the United Nations, enhances the legitimacy and durability of HOPE, but requires careful negotiation to reconcile divergent interests and priorities.

Figure 5 – Iranian languages



Source: https://medium.com/sunlanguagetheories/dabbling-diary-iranian-interests-kurdish-persian-etc-f56cee4c6202

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Historical baggage further complicates the regional landscape. Longstanding rivalries, unresolved territorial disputes, and enduring sectarian tensions continue to influence bilateral and multilateral relations among Gulf states. The legacy of past conflicts, from the Iran-Iraq War to intermittent maritime incidents and proxy confrontations, has generated deep-seated mistrust that cannot be ignored. For HOPE to succeed, it must not only focus on technical security measures but also en-gage with these historical sensitivities, building confidence through dialogue, incremental cooper-ation, and symbolic gestures that signal respect for sovereignty, cultural norms, and regional memory.

Collectively, these challenges underscore that HOPE is operating within a highly complex and contested environment, where security, economic interests, external influence, and historical lega-cies intersect. Addressing them effectively requires a multidimensional strategy that combines diplomacy, economic incentives, regional dialogue, and adherence to international law, while gradually building trust and practical cooperation among all stakeholders. Despite these challeng-es, sustained dialogue, confidence-building measures, and a commitment to peace can ensure suc-cessful implementation. During a meeting in 2022, Iran's former foreign minister Kamal Kharazzi called in Beijing for a new arrangement in the Persian Gulf, encompassing an agenda encompassing the following points for the Gulfi's consideration and use: (1) strengthening mutual understanding; (2) realizing friendly relations; (3) ensuring territorial integrity and respect for the international borders of Persian Gulf countries; (4) cooperating in eradicating terrorism, extremism, and sectarian tensions throughout the region; (5) peaceful settling of all regional tensions and disputes through dialogue; and (6) ensuring freedom of shipping and energy security for all.

Kamal Kharazzi continued that these objectives could be achieved only if all governments in the region "adhere to the principles of dialogue, equality, mutual respect, and refrain from the use of force, aggression, interference in each other's internal affairs, and participation in international coalitions against each other" .

Kamal Kharazzi's emphasis on adherence to principles—such as dialogue, equality, and mutual respect—is crucial. Both sides should refrain from force, aggression, and interference in internal affairs and avoid participating in international coalitions against each other. This dialogue could contribute to regional stability and cooperation by focusing on common interests and shared goals. Complementing these exchanges, confidence-building measures can play a crucial role in foster-ing trust, including joint military exercises, coordinated information sharing, and the creation of crisis communication mechanisms that reduce the risk of misunderstandings escalating into conflict.

Another significant attempt to reshape regional alignments came much later under the initiative of Javad Zarif, who advanced the idea of an Iranian-led bloc framed as both a celebration of Iranian nationalism and a vehicle for consolidating Tehran's influence across the Middle East. This vision sought to project Iran as the central node in a network of political, economic, and security partner-ships, aiming to institutionalize regional cohesion under its leadership. However, over time, Zarif recognized the limitations of such a top-down approach. He came to concede that durable regional arrangements rarely emerge from declarative blocs alone. Instead, he observed that effective co-operation often evolves through informal, incremental, and pragmatic channels of diplomacy. Drawing on lessons

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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from experiences such as the Samarkand Dialogue, as well as the gradual de-velopment of European Foreign Policy Cooperation, Zarif acknowledged that piecemeal engage-ment—rooted in trust-building, technical coordination, and incremental policy convergence—proved more resilient than ambitious, ideologically driven frameworks. This realization highlight-ed the importance of combining strategic vision with flexible, context-sensitive diplomacy when navigating the complex interplay of state and non-state actors in the region.

In line with this pragmatic approach, Zarif, alongside former Iranian ambassador Mohsen Bahar-vand, proposed the "Middle East Network for Atomic Research and Advancement" (MENARA) in July 2025. This initiative aims to promote civil nuclear cooperation across the Middle East and North Africa, including provisions for sharing enriched uranium and peaceful nuclear technolo-gies. MENARA seeks to shift the regional nuclear discourse from threat to opportunity and coop-eration, offering a long-term framework for managing civilian nuclear programs and supporting Iran's insistence on maintaining its uranium enrichment capabilities.

6.1 The Atomic File

During five rounds of negotiations held in Oman between 2025 and early 2026, the United States and Iran sought to revive a diplomatic framework addressing Iran’s nuclear program. The talks were mediated by Oman and described by intermediaries as cautious but constructive. Both sides agreed after each round to continue negotiations, preventing a full diplomatic breakdown.

A central area of convergence was the shared recognition that escalation would be costly and that diplomacy remained preferable to confrontation. However, substantive disagreements persisted throughout the process.

The most significant dispute concerned Iran’s uranium enrichment activities. Washington de-manded strict limits on enrichment levels and stockpiles, particularly regarding highly enriched uranium. Tehran, by contrast, insisted on its sovereign right to maintain enrichment under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Another major disagreement involved the scope of negotiations. The United States pushed for broader talks that would include Iran’s ballistic missile program and regional activities. Iran firm-ly rejected expanding the agenda beyond the nuclear file.

Sanctions relief was also a central sticking point. Iran demanded comprehensive and verifiable lifting of economic sanctions, especially those targeting its oil exports and financial system. The United States conditioned sanctions relief on concrete and verifiable nuclear concessions.

Verification mechanisms created additional friction. Washington insisted on intrusive monitoring and strict compliance frameworks. Tehran sought guarantees that any future agreement would not be unilaterally abandoned, referencing the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 deal.

Despite periodic statements about “progress,” no comprehensive agreement was reached.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Instead, the negotiations produced incremental understandings and technical discussions without resolving core disputes.

Oman's mediation played a stabilizing role throughout the rounds.

The talks reflected broader regional security tensions in the Persian Gulf.

Ultimately, while diplomacy remained open, structural mistrust and conflicting strategic priorities prevented a final settlement.

In this context, Jordannian intelligence now applied itself to engage in a complex maneuver acting on advanced knowledge that Iran will be bombed, eavesdropping at international hotels such as Four Seasons , next to which point GID agents intervened into the Institut Francais in Amman on a hunch feeling of communication, it transpired Russian made, while Hamas operatives in down town Amman staged a provocation in front of the central bank, eavesdropping on tips on how to fight Iran as assisted by GID, something that was followed-up by a smuggling attempt of a weap-ons cache out if Iraq and the loping of missiles into Israel, which gave Israel the pretext to launch the June war against Iran, after Iranians had paid visit to Moscow indicating a desire to move for the last leg of the bomb. This interrupted the negotiations in Oman whole I was imprisoned and evicted and cheated on by an ungrateful customer, even as a Raghadan courtier was dancing on my heart having an affair with a sexy GID female agent or something like that. The Russian ex-copper from Crimnea, aka The Silverfox , the presumed ringleader in Amman behind the staged insinua-tions at Institut Francais, operating a prostitution ring and involved in different sorts of interna-tional underground activities, was only apprehended and likely expelled from Jordan after another FSB-inspired mischief elsewhere in Europe. I am homeless now for eight months.

For the conduct of the talks between the US and Iran we recommend some principles are adopted to guide the rounds in Oman. First, that Iran as a confidence building measure start implementing the IAEA safeguards agreements. Second that log-rolling between the issues on the agreed agenda are allowed and that this log-rolling will result in an equilibrium that will largely define the deal. For instance Iran may want to swap a cap on enrichment with IAEA verification, whereas the EU thinks the prolongation of the sunset clauses is more important than discussion of missiles, so long as the EU are politically bound to conduct regional diplomacy, something that in practice means Iranian participation in the transition group on Syria, DDR of the PMF in Iraq in return for resumption of diplomatic links and constructive engagement in diplomacy on Yemen in the re-gion, say the Center for Strategic Studies, Amman.

Third, it is well known that the Gulfi's conditions for engaging Iran in an informal foreign policy dialogue in the format of GCC+1 are a free, independent and sovereign Iraq and peace in Yemen. The EU welcomes a study into a regional enrichment center in the region nonostante.

Fourth, relevant conversion facilities on the HEU-LEU down-blending must be identified and an agreement between Iran and IAEA be agreed to. The design of the sanction relief would per force be a phased one tied to verification, in any event, balanced by that Iran is obliged by

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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law to lever-age the atomic program against sanctions relief, comparable to EU's obligation to pursue regional diplomacy.

Fifth, we conceed the JCPOA has elapsed and that a JCPOA 2.0 is necessary, at which point the agreement on the HEU-LEU conversion between IAEA and Iran could be negotiated. This will take time to negotiate and prepare the existing down blending facilities in either Russia, the US or in the EU. The implication is then that the sunset clauses, a key sticking point in the negotiations, also has expired under JCPOA, raising the question whether the agreement between Iran and the US is doable and the wider context it inserts itself into.

Sixth, given Iran has an inherent interest in sanction relief a strategy thereon must be tied to veri-fiable steps. Any engagement strategy must start by defining what sanctions relief means in measurable terms (e.g., exact sanctions lifted, timing, scope, and guarantees), rather than general diplomatic language. Design a sequenced incentive structure where specific, verifiable Iranian actions (e.g., nuclear transparency steps) unlock pre-defined relief steps (e.g., phased lifting of oil export, banking, and trade sanctions). This reduces ambiguity that Tehran views as risk. Iran seeks credible reciprocity, not unilateral demands for restraint without benefits.

Strategically, structuring guarantees helps Iran commit with less fear of future reversal, enhancing long-term compliance stability through international legal commitments, multilateral oversight bodies, structured "snapback" thresholds that protect relief if conditions are met. A long-term strategy should not treat sanctions relief as a one-off gift, but as part of a broader economic inte-gration plan — linking relief to bilateral and regional economic cooperation, foreign direct in-vestment, and participation in global trade networks. This makes compliance economically more attractive and sustainable. A multi-vector hedging strategy vis-à-vis Russia and the Emirates hedges Tehran's risk of over-dependence on any single set of powers and leverages its regional strategic value. Communication and sequencing should be crafted to maximize domestic legitima-cy for compliance steps (e.g., early relief that yields visible economic benefits to ordinary citi-zens).

Sunset clauses were the original political lubricant of the JCPOA, but they are now the core strategic liability. Renewing them cannot be a simple extension; it has to be a re-engineering of time, incentives, and reversibility.

Here's a clean way to think about how to renew or replace sunsets in a way that still speaks to Iran's interest in sanctions relief and addresses proliferation risk.

The original sunsets assumed three things that no longer hold:

- trust would accumulate over time,
- Iran would integrate economically,
- regional threat perception would stabilize.

Instead, sanctions snapback, US withdrawal, and regional wars produced the opposite. Today, sun-sets are interpreted in Tehran as deferred sovereignty restoration, and in the West as a count-down to threshold status. That asymmetry is fatal.

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So renewal cannot look like "more time added.

Sunsets should expire only if conditions are met, not because the calendar runs out.

Instead of:

"Restrictions end after X years"

Use:

"Restrictions convert into lighter regimes once verified benchmarks are sustained."

Benchmarks could include:

- sustained enrichment caps below weapons-relevant thresholds,
- continuous IAEA access without dispute,
- defined limits on advanced centrifuge deployment,
- absence of undeclared material findings over a rolling period.

This turns sunsets into earned transitions, not automatic exits.

Rather than a single sunset date, introduce rolling review windows:

- every 5–7 years,
- automatic renewal unless a joint commission finds material breach,
- renewal paired with incremental sanctions normalization.

This matters politically in Tehran:

Iran can say "restrictions are temporary and revisable", while the other side avoids a hard nuclear cliff.

Think of it as arms control by subscription, not expiration.

Iran will not accept renewed constraints if sanctions relief remains fragile.

So renewal logic must include:

- conversion of lifted sanctions from executive waivers into harder-to-reverse legal statuses,
- EU-anchored trade, investment, and insurance mechanisms that persist across review cy-cles,
- escrow or dispute-buffer mechanisms to prevent instant economic shock during political crises.

In short:

Renewal of sunsets must deepen sanctions irreversibility, not just delay constraints.

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Not all restrictions should sunset at all.

A credible renewal framework separates:

- never-sunset norms: weaponization activities, military nuclear cooperation, clandestine facilities,
- managed-sunset domains: enrichment level, stockpile size, centrifuge type,
- convertible domains: export controls evolving into transparency regimes.

This aligns with how Cold War arms control survived regime change and crises.

Here the EU has real leverage — not rhetorical, but procedural.

The EU can:

- host and chair renewal review mechanisms,
- anchor compliance into EU–Iran contractual frameworks (trade, energy, aviation),
- act as guarantor of phased sanctions normalization tied to renewal outcomes,
- insulate parts of the regime from US electoral cycles.

For Tehran, this offers continuity.

For Europe, it restores relevance beyond mediation.

Sunsets can only be renewed if:

- Iran sees long-term economic normalization as achievable,
- the West accepts that Iran will remain a latent nuclear power, not a zero-capability state,
- both sides shift from coercive maximalism to managed risk.

Otherwise, sunsets will simply expire in practice — whether or not they exist on paper.

Sunset renewal is not a technical fix; it is a strategic redesign.

You renew sunsets by:

- moving from time → performance,
- from one-off expiry → rolling review,
- from reversible relief → entrenched economic normalization,
- and from bilateral fragility → EU-anchored institutional

This will then have to be codified into the JCPOA 2.0.

In summary, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded in 2015, has significant implications for Iran's role in the Persian Gulf, both directly and indirectly. By lifting certain in-ternational sanctions on Iran's oil exports and banking sector, the agreement allowed Tehran to regain critical revenue streams, which in turn enhanced its capacity to

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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project influence across the region. The additional economic resources enabled Iran to expand its military presence, fund al-lied militias in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and support regional proxies, all of which reinforced its strategic posture in the Gulf. Control over the Strait of Hormuz, a vital maritime chokepoint through which a substantial portion of global oil passes, remains central to Iran's security and bargaining strategies. Compliance with the JCPOA provided Iran with a form of international le-gitimacy, which allowed it to assert its regional interests while complicating efforts by other states to challenge its actions in the Gulf. Economically empowered, Iran could sustain naval de-ployments and coast guard operations that serve both defensive and coercive purposes. Its regional posture reflects a dual strategy of deterrence and diplomacy, linking nuclear negotiations to con-ventional military leverage. By demonstrating its willingness to engage in diplomacy, Iran strengthened its negotiating position vis-à-vis Gulf states and extra-regional powers, particularly the United States and European countries. Simultaneously, the threat of regional disruption, in-cluding potential interference with oil transit, functions as a strategic tool in Tehran's broader foreign policy. The JCPOA thus operates as a mechanism through which Iran balances compliance with international norms and assertive regional behavior. The agreement's economic and diplo-matic benefits have indirectly supported Iran's ability to finance proxy networks and maintain influence over key security dynamics in the Persian Gulf. Its naval and militia activities are shaped by both the resources made available through the deal and the strategic flexibility it pro-vides in negotiations. Iran's approach exemplifies the interplay between nuclear diplomacy and conventional power projection. The persistence of sanctions uncertainties and the possibility of JCPOA collapse continue to influence Tehran's tactical calculations in the Gulf. Overall, the JCPOA has contributed to a complex environment in which Iran's regional behavior is closely tied to both its nuclear diplomacy and its capacity to exert leverage over critical maritime and territo-rial spaces.

In terms of sequencing and for all practical purpose, the atomic file of Iran need to be completed for any cooperative scheme to move forward pending stabilization of Yemen and that of Irak, the sine qua non for reassuring the Gulfis to engage Iran.

6.2 Persian Gulf's role in Iran's foreign policy versus Iran's "Look East" policy and its core interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia:

The Persian Gulf as Strategic Heartland

The Persian Gulf is at the core of Iran's immediate security and economic geography. It is the strategic maritime space that hosts Iran's main energy export routes and lies adjacent to many of its main regional competitors and adversaries. Control and influence over the Gulf — most im-portantly the Strait of Hormuz — are leveraged for deterrence against outside military inter-vention, projection of power through allied militias, and safeguarding oil and gas exports which are vital for regime stability and revenue generation. Iran's approach in the Gulf blends military deterrence, asymmetric capabilities, and regional political engagement to shape the balance of forces in its favour, mitigate U.S. influence, and support allied actors. This theatre is proximal, immediate, and central to Iran's security and economic survival.

Look East Policy and Eurasian Engagement

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

By contrast, Iran's Look East policy reorients parts of its foreign policy beyond the immediate Middle Eastern theatre toward Asia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, driven by both geopolitical and economic imperatives. First articulated formally around 2005 and evolving since, this policy reflects Iran's desire to counter Western economic and political pressures (including sanc-tions) by deepening ties with Eastern powers and regional frameworks. It prioritises relations with countries such as China, Russia, India, and other Asian states while still allowing engagement with the West on a flexible basis.

In practical terms, this has meant Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organi-sation (SCO) as a platform for multilateral security and economic cooperation, seen as a bulwark against Western containment. It also involves integration into broader connectivity projects such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), positioning Iran as a key trans-it hub linking the Indian Ocean to the Caspian and beyond, which enhances its geoeconomic lever-age.

Core Interests in the Caucasus

In the Caucasus, Iran's interests are shaped by geography and security. Tehran shares borders and historical, cultural linkages with states such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and is attentive to corridors and perceived threats from external powers entering this space. Iran has reacted strongly to infrastructure projects (like the US backed TRIPP corridor in the South Caucasus), viewing them as potential shifts in the status quo near its borders — which Tehran tends to oppose if it believes they could undermine its security calculus. Iran also supports its ally Armenia as a counterweight to regional trends it deems unfavourable, reconciling geopolitical competition with the need to maintain influence at the northern edge of the Middle East.

Core Interests in Central Asia

In Central Asia, the Look East policy focuses on economic and connectivity interests as well as geopolitical presence. Iran seeks deeper trade, energy and transport linkages with countries like Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in part to integrate into regional value chains and corridors and to access new markets and energy resources — particularly given sanc-tions' constraints. (AVİM) Its geography gives it unmatched access for these landlocked states to ports in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean, especially through infrastructure such as Chabahar Port and rail corridors linked to broader Eurasian networks. (iais.uz) While culture and historical ties provide some soft power entry points, political cooperation is also geared toward ensuring stability and counter terrorism collaboration with Central Asian gov-ernments, which helps mitigate concerns about ethnic politics or extremist ideologies. (AVİM).

Geopolitical Logic: Regional vs Continental

Thus, the Persian Gulf role in Iran's foreign policy is immediate, security centric, and tied to en-ergy and deterrence, whereas the Look East strategy is more long term, economic and connec-tivity driven, aimed at diversifying alliances, reducing dependence on the West, and integrating Iran into wider Eurasian security and trade frameworks. The Persian Gulf is the anchor of Iran's regional posture — concentrated on defence and influence within its

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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proximate neighbourhood — while the Look East policy expands Iran's strategic horizon toward Eurasian politics, infrastruc-ture, and economic networks that can help buffer sanctions, enhance trade, and embed Tehran in multipolar structures that complement its regional ambitions.

Table

Dimension	Persian Gulf Focus	Caucasus & Central Asia
Geographic Scope	Immediate neighbourhood: Gulf littoral, Strait of Hormuz	Wider Eurasia: Caucasus, Central Asia, linking to Indian Ocean
Core Objective	Regime survival, deterrence, and control of strategic chokepoints	Diversification of alliances, economic integration, and connectivity
Security Strategy	Military deterrence, ballistic missiles, naval patrols, proxies	Political stability, counter-terrorism, engagement in regional security frameworks
Economic Focus	Oil and gas exports, energy security, resilience under sanctions	Trade, transit corridors, port access (e.g., Chabahar), integration into Eurasian markets
Diplomatic Tools	Regional alliances, proxy networks, Gulf initiatives (e.g., Hormuz Peace Plan)	Multilateral frameworks (e.g., SCO), bilateral ties with Russia, China, India
Time Horizon	Immediate and medium-term, focused on threats in the Middle East	Long-term, strategic positioning and economic leverage in Eurasia
Primary Threat Perception	U.S. military presence, Gulf Arab rivals	Western containment, regional rivalries, instability in transit states

Iran's foreign policy combines a regional security first orientation in the Persian Gulf with a broader Look East strategy toward Asia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In practice, this means Iran is less pivoted toward Europe and more toward Russia, China, and other non Western partners for trade, security support, and sanctions resilience. For the EU, this poses multiple engagement challenges. European diplomacy aims to sustain the JCPOA and promote regional stability, while Tehran increasingly frames relations in terms of resistance to Western pressure and alignment with Eastern powers.

In the Persian Gulf, Iran emphasizes control of the Strait of Hormuz, deterrence against U.S. and allied forces, and influence through local proxies. This orientation often runs counter to EU con-cerns about freedom of navigation, energy security, and regional stability. Iran's periodic threats to disrupt oil shipping through the Strait heighten European energy risk

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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calculations and compli-cate strategic cooperation. However, there are niches for cooperation, such as de escalation frameworks or climate related Gulf initiatives, where EU interests could align with Iranian incen-tives to reduce tensions.

Iran's Look East policy, championed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, explicitly prioritizes Asian partners over the West, seeking access to larger markets, technological cooperation, and reduced Western influence. This decreases incentives for Tehran to center its foreign policy on the EU, especially given the bloc's alignment with U.S. sanctions and human rights pressures. As Iran deepens ties with China, Russia, SCO members, and BRICS, the strategic space for EU influence shrinks.

The EU's engagement agenda is also heavily shaped by normative considerations, particularly human rights and governance. Recent EU designations of the IRGC as a terrorist organization and renewed sanctions reflect frustration with Iranian repression and nuclear standoffs, but they also harden diplomatic channels. These moves exacerbate tensions and limit the EU's leverage, even as European institutions still nominally support dialogue and preservation of the JCPOA framework.

Iran's dual strategy has several crucial implications for EU policy. The EU faces dilemmas in bal-ancing security and engagement, seeking both to moderate Iran's regional posture, including re-duced proxy activity and restraint in the Gulf, and to restore structured diplomacy. Reviving the nuclear deal remains central to EU engagement, but progress is hindered by mutual distrust and broader geopolitical alignments. Iran's turn to Asia means the EU must find value added, for ex-ample in trade, cultural exchange, or climate cooperation, to differentiate itself from China and Russia if it wants to retain strategic relevance. Iran's policies also affect EU interests beyond Teh-ran, including in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Red Sea, requiring closer coordination with Gulf states and NATO partners to manage security spillovers.

Despite these challenges, there are areas where EU engagement could still make strategic sense. Climate, environmental, and water security cooperation involving Iran and Gulf neighbors offers a low politics platform for confidence building and regional risk reduction. People to people di-plomacy and education exchanges can build societal linkages that are less sensitive than hard geo-politics. Humanitarian and migration cooperation, given shared regional pressures, may create avenues for practical collaboration even when higher politics are stalled.

Iran's strategic orientation, security centric in the Persian Gulf and increasingly Eastward in glob-al alignments, reduces the centrality of the EU in Tehran's foreign calculations. This complicates European efforts to engage on nuclear diplomacy, human rights, and regional stability while main-taining normative leverage. At the same time, the EU's focus on multilateral agreements, human rights, and diversified cooperation provides some niche levers for constructive engagement, even as Iran deepens non-Western ties and resists Western pressure. Successful EU policy will likely require pragmatic prioritization of shared interests, de-escalation frameworks, and targeted coop-eration areas that can survive broader geopolitical tensions.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The India–Iran relationship originates in a long-standing historical and civilisational continuum that predates the modern state system and formal diplomatic engagement. Its roots can be traced to shared linguistic, cultural, and religious foundations, reflecting the broader Indo-Iranian herit-age. Linguistic affinities between Sanskrit and Old Persian, as well as overlapping mythological and ritual traditions preserved in the Rigveda and the Avesta, exemplify these deep-seated connec-tions.

The Persianate age of India denotes a transformative historical period during which Persian cul-ture, language, and administrative practices exerted a profound and pervasive influence over the courts and governance structures of the subcontinent, extending approximately from the estab-lishment of the Delhi Sultanate through the height of the Mughal Empire. During this era, Persian evolved into the principal medium of administration, diplomacy, literature, and scholarly dis-course, effectively functioning as a unifying linguistic and cultural framework across diverse re-gional polities. Its adoption was not merely bureaucratic; it infused the intellectual, artistic, and literary spheres of India, shaping historiography, poetry, prose, and philosophical debate. Persian became the vehicle through which knowledge was codified, legal and political norms were articu-lated, and elite education was transmitted, thereby creating a shared cultural and cognitive horizon among the ruling classes. The widespread use of Persian facilitated sophisticated diplomatic communication both within the subcontinent and with neighboring Islamic courts, while also le-gitimizing political authority through cultural refinement. This period witnessed the emergence of a cosmopolitan elite, steeped in Persian literary aesthetics and ethical norms, whose administra-tive practices and cultural sensibilities would leave an enduring imprint on Indian political and social structures for centuries.

Adab comes originally from Arabic, from the root ʾadaba (أدب), which means “to discipline, to educate, to behave properly.” In Arabic, it refers to manners, etiquette, learning, and cultured con-duct. The term was adopted into Persian (Farsi) as Adab, expanding to include literary refinement, courtly etiquette, ethical cultivation, and polite social behavior. When Persianate culture spread to India, Adab entered the Indian context, influencing Hindi, Urdu, and other vernaculars, keeping its connotation of cultured behavior, moral propriety, and literary sophistication.

Farr (sometimes written Farrah or Farah) comes from Middle Persian/Pahlavi: khvarrah, mean-ing “divine glory, radiance, or sovereign charisma.” It is deeply rooted in Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic Persian political thought, where khvarrah represented the divine favor or legitimacy of kings. In the Islamic Persianate context, especially in India, Farr came to denote the ruler’s sym-bolic authority, moral virtue, and legitimacy, often linked to personal and aesthetic excellence, as well as spiritual and political charisma.

In short, Adab is about cultivated behavior, ethics, and refinement, while Farr is about sovereign legitimacy, authority, and moral-spiritual charisma. Together, they structured the ideals of rul-ership and elite culture in Persianate India.

Figure

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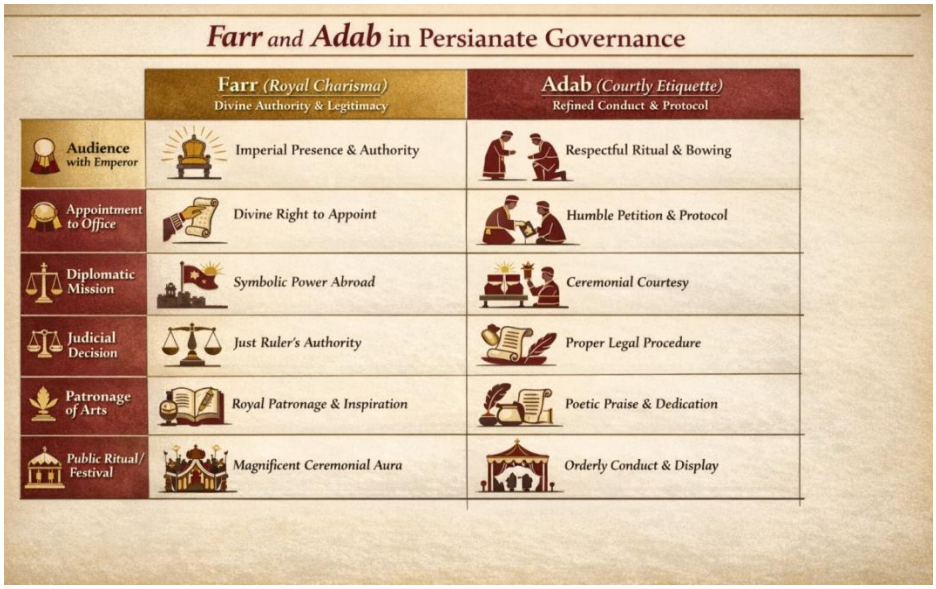
International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176



Courtly traditions, particularly the literary and ethical ideals of Adab, promoted refinement, eti-quette, and moral conduct among the elite. Adab influenced governance by emphasizing hierar-chical respect, decorum, and the cultivation of cultured rulers. Farr, understood as the aesthetic and moral sensibility derived from Persian ethics and poetry, reinforced the symbolic authority of the ruler. The interaction of Farr and Adab encouraged rulers to project legitimacy through both moral virtue and cultural sophistication. Persian historiography and literature provided models for political thought, governance, and diplomacy. Mughal and Sultanate rulers internalized these norms to consolidate power, mediate courtly factions, and present themselves as ideal sovereigns. The adoption of Persianate culture created a shared elite identity that transcended local ethnic and linguistic divisions, stabilizing political authority. Overall, Farah and Adab shaped political out-looks by linking ethical conduct, cultural refinement, and governance, producing a uniquely Per-sian-influenced Indian political ethos.

Commercial and cultural exchanges between the two regions date back to the Indus Valley Civili-zation (c. 3300–1300 BCE), when goods such as textiles, spices, and gems moved westward while Iranian materials, including metals and lapis lazuli, were imported into the Indian subcontinent. Successive Iranian empires, notably the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian dynasties, further facilitated trade and cultural contact, with northwestern Indian regions such as Gandhara incorpo-rated into imperial administrative and economic networks.

During the medieval period, Persian cultural and administrative influence became deeply en-trenched within the Indian subcontinent. Under the Delhi Sultanate and subsequently the Mughal Empire, Persian emerged as the dominant language of administration, literature, and high culture, giving rise to Indo-Persian literary forms and influencing regional languages, architecture, and governance. Migration of Iranian scholars, poets, and Sufi mystics contributed to the development of a shared intellectual and spiritual milieu, while the arrival of Zoroastrian communities (Parsis) from Iran further enriched India's religious and social landscape.

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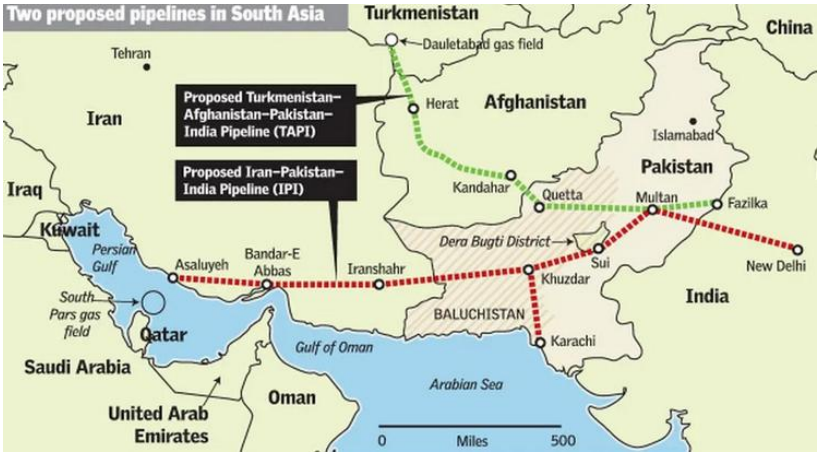
Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Formal diplomatic relations between India and Iran were established in 1950, yet contemporary political, economic, and strategic cooperation—including energy partnerships and connectivity initiatives such as the Chabahar Port project—builds upon this millennia-long substrate of interac-tion. Consequently, the India–Iran relationship reflects a continuous tradition of exchange, trade, and shared cultural heritage, which continues to inform bilateral ties and strategic calculations in the present era.

India's strategic outlook has evolved beyond a narrow regional focus to one encompassing multi-ple directions of engagement—east, south, and west. While Act East centres on Southeast and East Asia, in practice New Delhi also pursues a connectivity-oriented western outreach that engages West Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. This broader opening is visible in connectivity agreements such as India's accession to the Ashgabat Agreement, which links India via Iran to Central Asian markets and the Caspian region, underscoring New Delhi's interest in overland trade routes be-yond South Asia .

Figure India-Iran Pipelines



Initiatives like the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) explicitly aim to connect India with West Asia and Europe via Iran and the Gulf, illustrating a multi-directional outreach that approx-imates a westward strategic aperture. Investment in Chabahar port on Iran's southeastern coast provides access to Afghanistan and Central Asia via overland links rather than relying solely on sea lanes through the Straits of Hormuz and the Indian Ocean. This reduces strategic bottlenecks, diversifies trade, and enhances India's foothold west of South Asia. Taken together, these efforts signal that India's engagement is not uni-vectoral toward East Asia but is instead a multi-vector external policy that includes a significant opening toward the West through economic corridors and transit diplomacy.

The Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI) gas pipeline, initially conceived in the 1990s, would have transport-ed natural gas from Iran's South Pars field across Pakistan into India. Although India withdrew from active participation in 2009 due to pricing, security, and geopolitical concerns, the pipeline remains strategically symbolic and could shape regional security logic if revived. For India, the pipeline would have diversified energy sources and reduced dependence on volatile global LNG markets, contributing to long-term energy security,

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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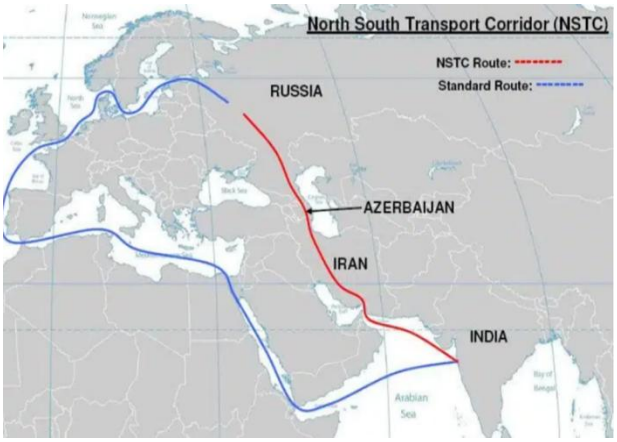
especially given India's rapidly rising demand for cleaner fuels and natural gas. It was sometimes termed a "peace pipeline" because its comple-tion would require cooperation across India–Pakistan–Iran lines, potentially lowering tensions and building economic interdependence. Operationally, the pipeline would have physically embedded India in continental energy infrastructure, potentially stabilising its western periphery and reduc-ing exposure to seaborne chokepoint risks such as disruption in the Strait of Hormuz. It could also restrain conflict spillovers by tying key actors to shared economic stakes. However, security con-cerns, especially transit security through Balochistan, historically volatile segments of Pakistan, along with international sanctions regimes, have constrained concrete progress. Nonetheless, pro-posals to revisit or reimagine the pipeline reflect continuing strategic interest in integrating India into continental energy grids.

TAPI was negotiated as a state-led, multilateral project under Asian Development Bank sponsor-ship rather than through corporate talks with armed groups. The four governments of Turkmeni-stan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India concluded intergovernmental and gas sales agreements be-tween 2010 and 2015. Unlike the 1990s Unocal initiative, the Taliban were not formal negotiating partners or signatories. Their role was limited to informal assurances of non-interference along parts of the route . Despite formal agreements, TAPI has remained stalled due to security risks, financing gaps, and regional political frictions.

India–Iran relations, rooted in mutual interests, contribute to Tehran's broader calculations of se-curity in several ways. Iran's vast energy reserves have historically made it an important supplier and partner in energy trade, and India's willingness to engage with Tehran, including through mechanisms such as rupee–rial payment arrangements, has helped Iran mitigate some effects of international sanctions. Projects like Chabahar port and potential involvement in corridors such as the INSTC provide Tehran with tangible economic integration with a rising Asian economy, which can cushion economic isolation and bolster regime resilience.

For Russia, the North–South Corridor is a strategic project that reduces dependence on Western-controlled transit routes and mitigates the impact of sanctions. It strengthens connectivity with Iran, India, and the Persian Gulf, anchoring Russia more firmly in Eurasian trade networks. The corridor enhances Moscow's leverage in energy, logistics, and industrial supply chains. It also deepens strategic alignment with Iran while offering access to Indian markets. In this sense, the North–South Corridor is as much a geopolitical instrument as an economic one undertaken in the context of Western sanctions.



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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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India offers Iran a counter-weight in regional geopolitics, as Tehran has looked to New Delhi as a partner distinct from Gulf Arab states aligned with the United States, while also sharing concerns about instability in Afghanistan and extremism. This creates a security dividend for Iran in several dimensions. Diversification of diplomatic partners reduces Iran's dependency on a narrow set of allies, such as China and Russia, and attenuates the psychological and strategic weight of external isolation. Engagement through multilateral corridors and trade routes, such as the INSTC and the Ashgabat Agreement, offers Iran additional levers in regional connectivity, thereby enhancing its bargaining power beyond the Persian Gulf. Iran's geography makes it a pivot between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. India's enduring engagement, even under sanctions, reinforces Iran's view that it retains strategic relevance on multiple axes of regional order. This, in turn, con-tributes to Tehran's sense of strategic insurance against isolation, particularly when global pres-sures rise. To a certain extent, the India-Iran pipeline represents an opening to the West for Iran. This approach should also be advanced to preclude the emergence of an Afghan–Pakistan–Iran convergence that could work against strategic interests in Balochistan; the Baloch issue must in-stead be addressed directly with a comprehensive, region wide strategy.

The Baloch issue encompasses political, economic, and security dimensions across Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Local populations have long sought greater autonomy and fair access to natural resources. Cross-border insurgent networks exploit the porous frontiers of the region. Human rights concerns exacerbate local grievances and fuel resentment. Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan each pursue competing strategic interests in Balochistan. These overlapping stakes create a risk of an Afghan–Pakistan–Iran alignment that could undermine regional stability. To prevent such con-vergence, proactive measures must be promoted. The Baloch issue must be confronted directly through comprehensive, region-wide strategies. Coordination among local and regional actors is essential to address both security and development concerns. Only a balanced approach that com-bines diplomacy, development, and security can sustainably resolve the Baloch challenge.

In sum, India's opening to the West is not limited to a maritime focus but encompasses overland and multimodal connectivity with West and Central Asia, with Iran serving as a linchpin in sever-al corridor projects. The IPI pipeline, even if not realised, conceptually underlines India's interest in integrating energy infrastructure across regional boundaries, a form of continental engagement that reinforces both economic and political security logic. India–Iran relations, underpinned by shared energy interests, counter-balancing concerns, and connectivity projects, contribute to Teh-ran's perception that it is part of a diverse network of strategic partners, thereby enhancing its own sense of security alongside other geopolitical factors, such as Russia–China alignments and re-gional diplomacy.

Iran's Look East policy is distinct from its bilateral ties with India in the sense that it pursues a broader regional and strategic engagement across East and Southeast Asia, rather than focusing narrowly on economic or energy partnerships with a single country. While Iran–India relations emphasize trade, energy, and infrastructure projects, the Look East policy aims to diversify Iran's diplomatic, technological, and security networks, extending influence toward China, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN states."

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Put simply: the Look East policy is multi-directional and strategic, whereas Iran–India ties have struggled to once more become more than largely bilateral and transactional, despite milllnis og interactions.

6.3. How to dialogue in the Persian Gulf ?

Foreign policy dialogue can be understood as operating along a spectrum ranging from formal to informal mechanisms, each with distinct characteristics, advantages, and limitations. Formal for-eign policy dialogue refers to structured exchanges conducted according to established protocols. Such dialogues prioritize clarity, accuracy, and a professional tone, often culminating in treaties, conventions, or memoranda of understanding that carry explicit obligations. One of the key ad-vantages of formal dialogue is legitimacy: agreements that emerge from formal channels are le-gally binding and enforceable, providing a robust framework for accountability. Transparency is another strength, as negotiations are often documented and subject to public scrutiny, which can reinforce trust and credibility among domestic and international audiences. Additionally, formal agreements contribute to stability and predictability in international relations, as the commitments they establish create a durable basis for managing disputes and guiding policy behavior over time.

However, formal dialogue is not without drawbacks. Its structured nature can produce rigidity, making amendments or adaptations to agreements complex and time-consuming. Negotiations themselves may span years, delaying responses to urgent or rapidly evolving challenges. Moreo-ver, while accountability is generally an advantage, it can also constrain states' flexibility in re-sponding to unforeseen circumstances, potentially limiting the agility required in dynamic geopo-litical environments.

In contrast, informal foreign policy dialogue is characterized by a more relaxed and spontaneous approach, often employing everyday language and allowing for personal interaction between offi-cials. The primary advantages of informal dialogue lie in its speed and flexibility. Decisions or understandings can be reached quickly, particularly in crises or emergent situations, and adjust-ments can be made readily as circumstances evolve. Informal interactions also foster trust-building, nurturing relationships between countries and facilitating communication channels that might later support more formal agreements.

Nonetheless, informal dialogue carries inherent risks. The absence of formal protocols can reduce transparency, leaving negotiations opaque and potentially raising suspicions among domestic con-stituencies or third-party actors. The relative lack of scrutiny increases the likelihood of unintend-ed consequences, as agreements may be enacted without sufficient consideration of broader impli-cations. Furthermore, informal agreements may suffer from perceived limitations in legitimacy; without formal ratification or legal binding, commitments may be viewed as provisional or less reliable, reducing their enforceability and long-term impact. In summary, both formal and informal approaches to foreign policy dialogue offer distinct merits and entail specific limitations. The choice between these modes of engagement requires careful consideration of the context, objectives, and constraints of the parties involved. A nuanced under-standing of when to employ formal mechanisms versus informal channels is essential for effective diplomacy, allowing states to balance the demands for legitimacy, transparency, stability, flexibil-ity, and trust in complex international interactions.

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Foreign policy dialogue in the Gulf context operates along a spectrum from formal to informal mechanisms, each carrying distinct implications for strategic engagement. Formal dialogue in-volves structured exchanges conducted according to established protocols, prioritizing clarity, accuracy, and professional standards. In practice, this includes treaties, conventions, and memo-randa that create legally binding obligations and reinforce accountability. Such mechanisms en-hance legitimacy and transparency, allowing domestic constituencies and international actors to monitor commitments, while providing stability and predictability in managing regional disputes and long-term energy, security, or economic arrangements. However, the rigid nature of formal dialogue can limit flexibility, as treaty amendments are often complex and protracted. Negotia-tions may take years, potentially delaying responses to urgent developments in rapidly shifting regional dynamics, including energy crises or security escalations.

Informal foreign policy dialogue, by contrast, is characterized by spontaneity, personal interac-tion, and flexibility. It enables states to respond quickly to emergent situations, adjust agreements as circumstances evolve, and cultivate trust through relationship-building between officials. In-formal channels are particularly useful in the Gulf, where overlapping spheres of influence—such as China's economic penetration, Iran's subregional schemes, and EU–Gulf initiatives—require nimble coordination and continuous engagement. Nevertheless, informal dialogue carries limita-tions. Reduced transparency can generate uncertainty or suspicion among domestic or third-party observers, while less scrutiny increases the risk of unintended outcomes. Moreover, the perceived legitimacy of informal agreements may be limited, as commitments lack formal legal enforceabil-ity and may be interpreted as provisional or advisory rather than binding.

In the context of EU–Gulf relations, both formal and informal dialogue mechanisms are essential and complementary. Formal agreements underpin energy partnerships, trade relations, and securi-ty arrangements, providing a stable framework for predictable engagement with Gulf states. Sim-ultaneously, informal channels facilitate real-time coordination on security incidents, humanitari-an crises, and hybrid threats, while enabling trust-building and flexible adjustments that formal protocols cannot accommodate swiftly. China's growing presence in the Gulf further underscores the need for a dual approach, as its strategy combines formal investment agreements and long-term energy contracts with informal, high-level diplomatic engagement and soft power initiatives. Similarly, Iran's subregional strategies often leverage informal networks and ad hoc arrange-ments, influencing energy corridors and regional alignments in ways that formal agreements alone cannot fully address.

Effectively navigating this interplay requires a nuanced understanding of when and how to deploy each form of dialogue. Integrating formal and informal mechanisms allows the EU and other external actors to balance the demands for legitimacy, predictability, and enforceability with the need for flexibility, rapid responsiveness, and relationship-building. By consciously combining structured agreements with informal engagement, policymakers can enhance regional stability, manage complex sub-system interactions, and respond to overlapping influences from China, Iran, and other regional actors, ensuring that strategic objectives in the Gulf are pursued coherently and effectively

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6.4 Why Dialogue?

Addressing security concerns in EU–Gulf relations requires a multifaceted and sustained approach. Diplomatic engagement remains central, as regular dialogues and robust diplomatic chan-nels foster understanding, build trust, and provide opportunities to resolve conflicts through peaceful means. At the regional level, cooperation on intelligence sharing, counterterrorism measures, and maritime security is essential, and joint military exercises can strengthen opera-tional coordination and enhance mutual confidence. Efforts to promote arms control and non-proliferation are equally critical, helping to prevent the escalation of tensions and reduce the risk of conflict. In parallel, cybersecurity and hybrid threats demand dedicated attention; enhancing digital resilience, countering disinformation campaigns, and addressing hybrid warfare tactics are increasingly vital to maintaining security in an interconnected region. Preparing for humanitarian crises, whether arising from natural disasters or conflicts, requires coordinated relief and assis-tance mechanisms to ensure timely and effective responses. Promoting broader stability also in-volves supporting conflict prevention initiatives and encouraging economic diversification and sustainable development, which contribute to long-term resilience. Sustained engagement, trust-building, and a long-term perspective are indispensable for these efforts to succeed.

Enhancing regional cooperation between the European Union and Gulf countries extends beyond security to include economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Economic partnerships can be strengthened through trade agreements, investment facilitation, joint ventures, and technology transfer, creating interdependence that reinforces stability and mutual prosperity. Cultural and educational exchanges further support this integration by fostering people-to-people connections, promoting student mobility, facilitating academic collaboration, and deepening mutual under-standing of cultural norms and values. Security cooperation, as noted, remains a critical compo-nent of the partnership, encompassing counterterrorism initiatives, intelligence sharing, and coor-dinated maritime operations. Environmental sustainability also requires collaborative action, ad-dressing climate change, water scarcity, and other ecological challenges, while sharing best prac-tices to promote resilient and sustainable development. Cooperation on health and pandemic pre-paredness, including healthcare infrastructure, research collaboration, and crisis response plan-ning, ensures readiness for future public health challenges. Political dialogue and mechanisms for conflict resolution complement these efforts, providing forums to address regional tensions, sup-port negotiation processes, and advance preventive strategies.

Sustained engagement, trust-building, and a commitment to shared goals remain central to the success of EU–Gulf cooperation. The first EU–GCC Summit in mid-October 2024 provided an opportunity for stock-taking, reaffirming the importance of these multidimensional approaches in promoting stability, security, economic growth, and regional resilience.

6.5 DRAFT AGENDA FOR AN INFORMAL GCC+1 Dialogue

In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has recognized the need for collaboration and dialogue to address regional challenges. The emergence of the GCC Vision for Regional Security underscores this commitment. As tensions have eased following the Beijing Agreement, there is a unique opportunity for informal dialogue between Iran and the

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GCC. This dialogue aims to foster peaceful coexistence, enhance security, and promote sustainable regional development.

Constructive engagement with Iran is pivotal for the success of this dialogue. An isolated Iranian position could disrupt progress towards development and peace. By focusing on collaboration, peaceful conflict resolution, and sustainable development, the GCC not only aims to enhance the security and prosperity of its member states but also contributes to a more stable and peaceful international order.

Figure 6 – Kish Island

Regional dialogue would present Washington and Tehran with honourable alternatives to constant escalations, providing Iran with an opportunity for economic recovery after years of financial pressure.

Territorial disputes in the Persian Gulf have long shaped regional politics and security dynamics. Key areas of contention include islands and maritime boundaries, often linked to strategic ship-ping lanes and energy resources. Disputes such as Iran-Bahrain over the Hawar Islands, Bahrain-Qatar over maritime demarcation, and the Al-Buraimi oasis between Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia illustrate the complexity of historical claims and overlapping sovereignties. These disputes are compounded by colonial-era agreements and differing interpretations of international law. They not only affect bilateral relations but also influence regional alliances and security arrange-ments. Resolving such disputes requires sustained diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and, in many cases, third-party mediation to ensure peaceful coexistence. The development of an informal policy agenda for the Gulf draws important lessons from the in-cremental and pragmatic approaches observed in the Samarkand Dialogue and European Foreign Policy Cooperation, demonstrating how sustained, piecemeal engagement can gradually build trust, align interests, and produce durable regional frameworks even amid complex geopolitical rivalries.

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6.6 The GCC+1 Iran Foreign Policy Agenda cooperation agenda

It is for the parties to define the agenda of their foreign policy pourparlers. In the EU and Central Asia – the EPC and Samarkand dialogue – things have gone more smoothly when talking in an informal setting, something that most also be organized and prepared for.

An agenda in an informal policy framework provides several strategic advantages. It establishes a clear set of priorities, guiding discussions and ensuring that dialogue remains focused on actiona-ble objectives. By outlining key issues—such as security, economic cooperation, or environmental management—an agenda helps coordinate the efforts of diverse stakeholders and provides a refer-ence point for measuring progress over time. It also facilitates transparency and accountability, as participants can track commitments, monitor implementation, and adjust strategies based on evolving circumstances. Moreover, in contexts where trust is limited, a shared agenda can serve as a neutral platform for engagement, encouraging incremental consensus without requiring immedi-ate formal agreements.

However, informal policy agendas also face inherent limitations. Unlike formal treaties or binding agreements, they rely on voluntary participation and lack enforceable mechanisms, which can re-duce the durability of commitments. Divergent interests among stakeholders may lead to selective engagement, with actors prioritizing only those elements of the agenda that align with their strate-gic goals. Additionally, informal agendas are susceptible to external pressures, including geopolit-ical rivalries, domestic political shifts, or economic shocks, which can disrupt continuity. Finally, without formal institutional support, the agenda may struggle to translate dialogue into concrete actions, limiting its overall impact on structural challenges or long-standing disputes.

That may not feel like a strong region, but at least it represents a real gathering and a caucus of like-minded diplomatic leaders:

1. Strengthening Mutual Understanding

Fostering open communication channels between Iran and the Gulf States is fundamental to over-coming historical mistrust and building long-term cooperation. Initiatives such as cultural ex-changes, academic collaborations, and people-to-people interactions create networks of trust that persist even amid political tensions. By promoting dialogue at both the governmental and societal levels, stakeholders can develop shared perspectives and reduce the likelihood of misperceptions escalating into conflict.

2. Promoting Friendly Relations

Acknowledging historical ties and shared interests provides a foundation for constructive en-gagement. Joint initiatives in trade, tourism, and scientific research create tangible benefits for all parties, reinforcing the incentives for cooperation. These efforts can help normalize relations, en-courage collaboration beyond the political elite, and demonstrate the practical advantages of sta-bility to domestic constituencies.

3. Addressing Shared Environmental Challenges

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The Gulf region faces critical environmental issues, including water scarcity, marine pollution, and climate change impacts. Collaborative approaches to environmental management—such as joint water resource projects, pollution mitigation programs, and climate adaptation strategies—can foster trust while addressing a common existential threat. Shared environmental initiatives also create opportunities for technical cooperation and knowledge exchange.

4. Energy Transition and Security

Energy is both a driver of economic interdependence and a source of geopolitical leverage. Coop-eration on transitioning to cleaner energy sources, enhancing energy security, and coordinating on energy infrastructure can help reduce competition over resources while promoting sustainable growth. These initiatives can also serve as confidence-building measures, signaling a commitment to regional stability.

5. Enhancing Connectivity

Developing infrastructure and transport corridors, as well as digital and economic networks, strengthens regional integration. Greater connectivity facilitates trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges, creating interdependencies that incentivize peaceful cooperation. Infrastructure projects can also generate local employment and stimulate economic growth, making stability materially beneficial for all stakeholders.

6. Strengthening Food Security

Collaborative approaches to food production, distribution, and resilience are essential in a region vulnerable to climate stress and geopolitical disruption. Coordinated agricultural policies, shared storage and distribution systems, and regional crisis management plans can ensure the reliability of food supply, reduce vulnerabilities, and strengthen overall societal resilience.

7. Cooperation in Countering Terrorism, Extremism, and Sectarian Tensions

Joint intelligence sharing, coordinated capacity-building, and interface dialogue are critical for addressing security threats and reducing sectarian tensions. Cooperation in these areas not only counters violent extremism but also fosters trust among regional actors, creating a more predicta-ble and secure environment for economic and political engagement.

8. Peaceful Settlement of Regional Tensions and Disputes

Formal frameworks for dialogue and mediation are essential for resolving both historical and con-temporary disputes. Border conflicts—including Iran-Bahrain, Bahrain-Qatar, Iraq-Kuwait, UAE-Saudi Arabia, Al-Buraimi, and Oman-UAE (Musandam)—require structured negotiation process-es that incorporate confidence-building measures and third-party facilitation where appropriate. A focus on peaceful resolution enhances stability and prevents local disputes from escalating into wider conflicts.

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Engaging non-governmental actors through Track II diplomacy—including academics, experts, and civil society representatives—can generate innovative solutions, facilitate informal problem-solving, and create networks of mutual understanding that support official negotiations. Identify-ing shared interests, whether in economic cooperation, environmental protection, infrastructure development, or public health, provides a tangible basis for collaboration that can help shift the focus from confrontation to constructive engagement. Neutral mediation by third parties or inter-national organisations further supports this process, offering impartial facilitation, bridging gaps, and helping to design win–win outcomes that respect the core concerns of all parties.

A long-term perspective is essential, one that looks beyond immediate disputes and envisions sus-tainable regional stability founded on mutual benefits and predictable norms of behaviour. Cultur-al exchange programs, people-to-people interactions, and educational initiatives also contribute to this objective by fostering empathy, understanding, and respect for different societal perspectives. Finally, effective dialogue must address the root causes of tension, including historical grievanc-es, competition over resources, and structural inequalities, recognizing that preventing conflicts is far more effective than managing them after they erupt. Ultimately, dialogue is not a quick fix but a continuous and deliberate process that combines diplomacy, trust-building, shared interests, me-diation, and cultural understanding to create resilient frameworks for peace.

Table Foreign policy dialogue

Approach	Description	Examples / Mechanisms
Open Channels	Establish direct communication channels between involved parties to enable understanding, clarify intentions, and identify common ground.	Bilateral or multilateral diplomatic talks, regular high-level meetings, secure communication lines.
Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)	Implement actions that foster trust and reduce the risk of miscalculation or escalation.	Joint military exercises, intelligence and information sharing, crisis communication protocols.
Track II Diplomacy	Engage non-governmental actors, academics, and experts in unofficial dialogue to generate creative solutions and bridge divides.	Expert working groups, academic forums, civil society dialogues, cross-border workshops.
Shared Interests	Identify common goals that provide a basis for collaboration and constructive engagement.	Economic partnerships, environmental initiatives, cross-border infrastructure projects.
Mediation and Facilitation	Utilize neutral mediators or international organizations to facilitate dialogue and reconcile differences.	UN or regional organizations acting as facilitators, third-party arbitration, international envoys.
Long-Term Vision	Develop strategies that look beyond immediate disputes to establish sustainable stability and mutual benefits.	Multi-year development or security plans, cooperative regional frameworks, strategic roadmaps.
Cultural Exchange	Promote understanding through people-to-people interactions, education, and cultural programs.	Student exchange programs, joint cultural festivals, interfaith dialogue initiatives.

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Conflict Prevention	Address structural and historical sources of tension to prevent conflicts before they arise.	Resource-sharing agreements, historical reconciliation efforts, early-warning monitoring systems.

Remember that dialogue is not a quick fix but a sustained effort toward peace. And in this port of the world balance of power is often the prerequisite for moving forward, and moving forward implies Yemen becomes more peaceful and the Red Sea better organised, and Iraq free and independent given the utter disintegration of the inter-arab state system due to warfare, poor governance and corruption and the break-down of the societal contract.

6.7 Domestic sources of Iran's foreign policy

Iranian society is marked by deep and persistent cleavages that shape its political, social, and cul-tural life. One of the most visible divides is generational, between the entrenched old guard and a younger, more globally connected population. The old guard includes members of the Revolution-ary Guard, conservative clerics, and state bureaucrats who maintain a strong hold on power.

They are committed to preserving the revolutionary ideals of 1979 and resisting rapid social or political change.

In contrast, Iran's youth increasingly demand more freedom, personal rights, and opportunities to shape their country's future. Young Iranians are concentrated in urban centers, universities, and online networks, where exposure to global ideas is higher. This generational tension often mani-fests in debates over human rights, governance, and the rule of law. Youth movements frequently call for reforms in political participation and civil liberties. They challenge restrictions on free-dom of expression, women's rights, and minority protections. The old guard wants to monopolise power, the youth to be taken seriously, to participate and are open to the world. A joke goes."Why do you look happy? Have you been abroad ?"

Iranian youth, comprising over 60% of the country's 88 million population, are largely urbanized, well-educated, and tech-savvy, having been born after the 1979 revolution. They face high unem-ployment and underemployment, estimated between 25 and 40 percent for young adults, which, combined with rising living costs and economic hardship, fuels widespread disillusionment and drives social, economic, and political protests. As the most rebellious segment of society, they are key drivers of dissent, including the 2022 protests, challenging the theocratic rule and advocating for social and political reforms. Roughly 22 percent of the population is aged 15 to 29, and a large portion of Iranians is under 30, creating a generational divide with the traditional, aging political elite. Highly connected and digitally literate, they use social media to bypass government censor-ship and express desires for social freedoms, such as attending unofficial concerts or relaxing dress restrictions. Many consider emigration due to limited economic opportunities and restrictive social policies, highlighting the tension between their modern, progressive outlook and the con-servative establishment. Compounding these pressures, young men must also contend with two years of mandatory military service. Despite these challenges, Iranian youth remain the most cru-cial, active, and vocal segment of the opposition, representing a potent force for change within society.

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Iran's center-periphery divide is a deeply entrenched structure in which the Persian-dominated political, economic, and cultural core—centered on Tehran and the central provinces—exerts con-trol over marginalized, ethnically diverse, and often underdeveloped border regions. This imbal-ance fuels systemic inequalities, as peripheral areas such as Kurdistan, Sistan-Baluchistan, and Khuzestan experience higher poverty, limited infrastructure, and greater political repression, lead-ing to frequent protests and anti-regime activism. The core, located on the central plateau in cities like Tehran, Esfahan, and Qom, serves as the political, economic, and cultural heart of the Islamic Republic, concentrating wealth, infrastructure, and resources, while the periphery is populated by non-Persian, often non-Shiite ethnic minorities, including Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Azeris, and Turkmens. Structural inequalities are reinforced by central planning that siphons resources away from the periphery, leaving these regions underdeveloped despite their natural wealth, such as Khuzestan's oil reserves, and prompting movements like "Woman Life Freedom" to emerge along the borders. Drivers of marginalization include ethnic and sectarian discrimination that privileges Persian Shiite identity, economic deprivation and high unemployment, heavy securitization in response to protests, and environmental pressures, including mismanagement of scarce water re-sources in arid areas like Sistan-Baluchistan. The center-periphery tension thus reflects not only geographic disparities but also deeper divisions linked to class, gender, political authority, and ethnic and religious identity, shaping the dynamics of governance, social protest, and regional inequality across Iran.

Mohammedali & Eslami (2025) argues that the rule of law and the right to good governance are recognized as two fundamental principles essential for safeguarding citizens' rights and ensuring sustainable development in Iran. The rule of law signifies the establishment of justice and the equal enforcement of laws for all individuals and institutions, a concept emphasized in the princi-ples of the Iranian Constitution. Good governance is described as encompassing transparency, ac-countability, participation, fairness, and efficiency in decision making processes. These principles together contribute to the establishment of an efficient, accountable governance system that can foster social and economic development. Within Iran's administrative organizations, the rule of law requires that all governmental actions be legally grounded and transparent to prevent arbitrary exercise of power. Article 1 of the Constitution explicitly enshrines the rule of law as a core com-ponent of the political system. Administrative decisions must respect legal norms and protect citi-zens' rights to prevent misuse of authority. The rule of law is vital for ensuring equality in access to public services and preventing discrimination. Good governance principles are linked to consti-tutional provisions that promote citizen participation and accountability in public affairs. Article 7 supports citizen involvement in political processes through mechanisms such as elections and lo-cal councils. Social justice and non discrimination are anchored in constitutional mandates, rein-forcing goals of equitable governance. Freedom of expression and thought, protected under Article 19, is framed as integral to good governance and public accountability. The establishment of the Administrative Justice Court is highlighted as a constitutional mechanism for monitoring legali-ty and enhancing accountability. This judicial institution reviews administrative decisions and protects citizens' rights against arbitrary state actions. Good governance principles are applied also to economic policies, where transparency and accountability are seen as drivers of sustainable economic growth. Corporate governance norms are discussed as tools for increasing trust, reduc-ing corruption, and attracting investment. Stakeholder participation in economic decision making is viewed as crucial for

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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more effective and inclusive governance. Good management practices in companies are said to improve performance, productivity, and responsiveness to public needs. Judicial indicators of good governance include transparency in proceedings, accountability of of-ficials, and the efficiency of the Administrative Justice Court. The court's oversight helps rein-force legal principles, raise public awareness of rights, and hold state actors accountable. In con-clusion, embedding the rule of law and good governance within the Iranian legal system is pre-sented as essential for building an accountable, just administrative order that respects human rights and fosters public trust

The old guard, however, often sees these demands as threats to national stability and ideological continuity. Centrists and reformist politicians occupy a complex middle ground, advocating grad-ual change within existing institutions. They attempt to mediate between conservative hardliners and progressive youth movements. Despite their efforts, centrists often face pressure from both extremes, limiting their ability to enact meaningful reforms. Governance in Iran is thus a contest between these competing social and political forces. The legal system is another arena where cleavages are visible, particularly regarding rule of law and accountability. Many Iranians criti-cize the judiciary for lack of independence and transparency. Human rights organizations docu-ment systemic abuses, including arbitrary detention and restrictions on political dissent.

Women's rights are a particularly contested area, with debates over dress codes, education, and participation in public life. Ethnic and religious minorities also face discrimination, adding anoth-er layer to societal tensions. Economic grievances exacerbate these cleavages, as youth unem-ployment and inflation create frustration. The Revolutionary Guard controls significant sectors of the economy, deepening perceptions of inequality. Corruption and nepotism are persistent chal-lenges in both public and private institutions. These economic realities reinforce distrust in gov-ernance and fuel demands for accountability.

Cultural and social freedoms, including music, film, and internet access, are frequent flashpoints. Social media has amplified youth voices, enabling campaigns for reform and exposing abuses. However, the state often responds with censorship, arrests, and surveillance. Education and intel-lectual discourse are also shaped by ideological divides, influencing what students learn and de-bate. The media landscape reflects these cleavages, with state-controlled outlets promoting conserva-tive narratives and independent voices advocating reform.

Religion plays a central role in shaping political identity, yet interpretations vary widely between generations. While Khomeini is revered as a My Iman, less than 10% of Iran's population regular-ly go to mosque for prayer. Many young Iranians embrace secular or hybrid worldviews, clashing with the theocratic orientation of the leadership.Public protests, from 2009 to recent years, demonstrate the intensity of societal demands for change. These movements often highlight hu-man rights violations, corruption, and governance failures.

International human rights organizations monitor Iran closely, noting persistent restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and religion. Political prisoners, including journalists and activ-ists, symbolize the broader struggle over rights and rule of law. Despite repression, civil society networks continue to operate and advocate for reforms. The old guard relies on

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institutional con-trol, security forces, and ideological legitimacy to maintain power. Youth and reformist forces leverage digital tools, global awareness, and civic engagement to push boundaries. These cleavag-es shape Iran's domestic politics, its foreign policy decisions, and its engagement with global norms.

The ongoing tension between stability and reform defines the trajectory of governance, human rights, and legal development.

Understanding these societal divisions is crucial to analyzing Iran's political future and the poten-tial for meaningful change.

The role of the Shia clergy in running the Iranian state is central to how the Islamic Republic functions and is a major subject of debate both inside and outside Iran. At the core of the system is the doctrine of velayat e faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which gives religious ju-rists—especially the Supreme Leader—ultimate authority over political and religious affairs in the country. Under this doctrine, the Supreme Leader, a senior Shia cleric, holds supreme power over all branches of government and major state decisions, deriving his authority from a religious mandate rather than popular consent. (institute.global)

Iran's constitution formally embeds clerical authority, reserving key institutions for clerics: the Guardian Council must include at least six clerical jurists who vet legislation and all election candidates, and the Assembly of Experts, another body of clerics, is charged with appointing and theoretically overseeing the Supreme Leader. (IranWire) In practice, however, the Supreme Lead-er exerts overwhelming influence over these bodies, controlling appointments and political direc-tion, which limits independent oversight. (institute.global)

The clergy's role extends beyond formal institutions into social and cultural life. Shia clerics influence public discourse on morality, family life, gender roles, education, and religious practice, and they oversee powerful networks of seminaries, charitable organizations, and mosques that propagate the state's ideological narratives. (journalofpoliticalscience.com) Historically, clerics have also been able to mobilize public support, drawing on longstanding ties to communities across Iran—especially in rural and religious areas—which helped bring about the 1979 Revolu-tion and have sustained the regime's ideological legitimacy since. (The Iran Primer)

At the same time, scholars note that this fusion of religious and political authority is relatively unusual in Shia history: before 1979 many Shia clerics maintained distance from executive power, and political involvement was not institutionalized as state rule. (THE INTERNATIONAL AF-FAIRS REVIEW) Since the revolution, however, the clerical establishment has become deeply embedded in state structures—a transformation that is sometimes critiqued within Iran itself. For example, Iranian intellectuals like Hashem Aghajari have faced severe punishment for questioning clerical dominance in political life.

Debates in Iranian society often center on whether the clergy should hold such pervasive authority. Critics argue that clerical control undermines democratic accountability, constrains civil liberties, and blocks reforms, because unelected religious leaders can override elected institutions and shape law and policy according to theological interpretations. Supporters, by contrast, often frame clerical leadership as essential to preserving Iran's Islamic identity and

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social order, grounded in the belief that religious jurists are best qualified to interpret and apply divine law. (institute.global)

In summary, the Shia clergy run the Iranian state through constitutional authority, institutional control, and social influence, with the Supreme Leader at the apex of power under velayat e faqih. This arrangement is central to the regime's legitimacy and governance, but it is also a focal point of domestic debate over the balance between religious authority, popular sovereign-ty, and the rule of law. (institute.global).

In Iran, the Shia clergy exerts influence not only over political and judicial institutions but also over large segments of the economy, particularly through state-run companies and affiliated foun-dations known as bonyads. These organizations control vast resources, including industrial enter-prises, real estate, and financial institutions, often operating with limited transparency and outside conventional market regulations. Clerical oversight of these entities allows the religious estab-lishment to consolidate economic power alongside political authority, ensuring that economic activity aligns with ideological and strategic priorities. This economic role reinforces the clergy's capacity to shape policy, social programs, and even employment, linking religious authority di-rectly to material control.

Alongside the formal economy, the bazaar—Iran's traditional commercial heartland—is dominat-ed by the bazaaris, a class of merchants historically connected to the Shia clerical network. The bazaaris serve as both economic actors and social intermediaries, facilitating commerce while also maintaining close ties with religious authorities. During the 20th century and particularly in the 1979 revolution, bazaaris were critical in mobilizing political support, providing funding for clerical-led movements, and shaping urban social norms. Their influence extends beyond markets; the bazaaris act as a stabilizing force in society, linking the grassroots population to clerical lead-ership, and serving as a key component of Iran's socio-economic governance.

The relationship between the clergy and the bazaaris is mutually reinforcing. Clerics rely on ba-zaar networks to implement economic policies and maintain social legitimacy, while bazaaris benefit from clerical protection, preferential access to state-backed contracts, and moral authority in disputes. This intertwining of religion, commerce, and politics exemplifies how economic and social power in Iran is inseparable from clerical authority. Together, state-run companies and the bazaar form parallel pillars of influence: one formal and institutional, the other traditional and commercial, both deeply embedded in the clerical-led political order. By controlling these eco-nomic networks, the clergy and their bazaar allies shape not only wealth distribution but also po-litical loyalty, social norms, and the capacity of citizens to engage in autonomous economic or political activity.

The bazaaris, often conservative and aligned with clerical interests, also act as a buffer against rapid social change, reinforcing traditional norms in urban life while maintaining channels for negotiation with the state. Their role is particularly visible during periods of economic stress or protest, when bazaar strikes or boycotts can signal widespread discontent or lend weight to politi-cal demands. In sum, the Shia clergy's dominance over state-run enterprises, coupled with the bazaaris' embedded position in commerce and society, creates a distinctive model of governance in Iran, in which religious authority, economic control, and

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social influence are tightly inter-twined, sustaining both political power and societal cohesion.

6.8 IRGC in Iranian Society

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) occupies a central role in Iranian political, eco-nomic, and military life, functioning as both a security force and a socio-economic actor. Estab-lished after the 1979 revolution, the IRGC's primary mission was to safeguard the ideological and political goals of the Islamic Republic, serving as a parallel military institution to the regular Ira-nian armed forces. Over time, its influence expanded far beyond defense, permeating domestic politics, media, business, and education, giving it an outsized role in shaping governance and so-cietal norms.

Economically, the IRGC controls a vast portion of Iran's sanctioned and domestic economy through affiliated conglomerates, construction firms, and state-backed enterprises, many orga-nized under the Khatam al-Anbiya construction base and related entities. These networks operate across oil, gas, telecommunications, real estate, and manufacturing sectors, generating revenue streams independent of formal state budgets. The IRGC's economic reach allows it to fund politi-cal allies, social programs, and military expansion while circumventing international sanctions, creating a semi-autonomous "sanctioned economy" that supports both regime stability and strate-gic operations.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, Sepah-e Pasdaran) has profoundly shaped Iran's strategic doctrine since its creation after the 1979 Revolution. Initially conceived as a revolution-ary militia tasked with protecting the Islamic Republic and the ideals of the Revolution, the IRGC has expanded into a multidimensional military, political, and ideological actor. During the Iran–Iraq War from 1979 to 1988, the IRGC's doctrine emphasized asymmetric and ideological war-fare. Lacking conventional capabilities, it relied on mobilization of volunteers, guerrilla tactics, and human-wave attacks, with a focus on defending the regime rather than conventional territorial defense. After the war, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, the IRGC professionalized and cre-ated specialized branches such as the Qods Force for extraterritorial operations and the Basij for internal control. Iran's doctrine evolved to include strategic depth, projecting influence through proxy militias in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and later Yemen. In the 2000s and beyond, under the pres-sure of U.S. sanctions, the IRGC formalized a hybrid doctrine combining conventional military capabilities, including missile forces and asymmetric naval operations, with proxy warfare, cyber operations, and ideological influence, reinforcing the regime's strategic deterrence while bypass-ing conventional limitations.

The IRGC operates across multiple overlapping spheres. Militarily, it remains the architect of Iran's asymmetric warfare doctrine, overseeing missile development, naval chokepoint control in the Strait of Hormuz, and unconventional operations through the Qods Force. Politically, it has increasingly inserted itself into domestic affairs by supporting loyal factions, shaping elections, and suppressing dissent through Basij paramilitary forces and intelligence networks. Economical-ly, sanctions created space for the IRGC to expand into Iran's strategic sectors, including energy, construction, telecommunications, and shipping, often operating quasi-autonomously and control-ling lucrative contracts. Religiously and

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ideologically, the IRGC positions itself as a guardian of Revolutionary Islam, collaborating with clerical authorities while promoting loyalty to the Su-preme Leader, intertwining military, political, and religious authority.

Efforts to curtail IRGC influence are limited due to its deep embedding in multiple power do-mains. Attempts to limit its political influence are constrained by its electoral networks, ideologi-cal legitimacy, and enforcement power. Sanctions aimed at constraining its economic activities have had mixed results, as the IRGC often adapts through opaque networks and front companies, consolidating its control over strategic industries. Its alignment with the Supreme Leader and con-trol over revolutionary ideology make religious limitations politically sensitive, leaving internal clerical authority as the only realistic constraint.

The IRGC has consistently resisted full integration with the Artesh, or regular army, maintaining a distinct identity and operational doctrine. It views the Artesh as professionally competent but ide-ologically neutral, whereas the IRGC prioritizes loyalty to the Revolution and the Supreme Lead-er. While operational coordination exists, particularly in conventional defense and missile de-ployment, the IRGC preserves autonomy in strategy, foreign operations, and internal security, per-ceiving a merger as a threat to its political and ideological privileges. This dual-structure model allows Iran to maintain strategic redundancy while embedding political control, effectively lever-aging the IRGC as both a military and political instrument.

Overall, the IRGC has transformed Iran's strategic doctrine from a defensive, territorial model to a hybrid, asymmetric, and ideologically anchored framework. Its doctrine emphasizes proxy net-works and regional influence over conventional defense, integrates military, economic, and reli-gious tools to preserve regime stability, and develops deterrence strategies including missile pro-grams, cyber capabilities, and asymmetric naval warfare independent of the regular army. This combination has made the IRGC the central driver of Iran's contemporary strategic posture. For the Artesh (regular army) and the IRGC to merge into a true "citizen army", several fun-damental political, institutional, and cultural reforms would be required. A citizen army implies a force that is professionally unified, apolitical, accountable to the state rather than ideology, and reflective of society at large. In the Iranian context, this would involve:

First, a clear separation of military authority from ideological and political loyalty. The IRGC's identity is deeply tied to the Revolution and the Supreme Leader, while a citizen army must operate under civilian, constitutional control and be politically neutral. This would require redefining the chain of command so that both the Artesh and IRGC are subordinated exclusively to the Ministry of Defense and the President, rather than parallel authorities or clerical oversight.

Second, organizational integration and standardization. The two forces have very different doctrines, cultures, and operational mandates. The IRGC emphasizes asymmetry, ideology-driven operations, and internal security, while the Artesh is conventional and professional. Merging them into a citizen army would require harmonizing training, operational doctrine,

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rank structures, and equipment, while eliminating overlapping or competing chains of authority.

Third, curtailing political and economic privileges. The IRGC's extensive economic holdings, political influence, and social networks would need to be brought under civilian oversight. A citi-zen army cannot be a political or economic actor; it must be solely a professional defense institu-tion funded and regulated by the state.

Fourth, reforming recruitment and social composition. A citizen army should reflect broader society rather than ideological or regional elites. This would require broadening recruitment be-yond Basij-linked volunteers or revolutionary loyalists, emphasizing merit, professional stand-ards, and national service obligations.

Fifth, ideological neutrality and professional ethics. The merged force would need a clear doc-trine emphasizing national defense, professionalism, and civic duty rather than revolutionary ide-ology, religious authority, or loyalty to a single faction. Military education would need to focus on ethics, civil-military relations, and constitutional obligations.

Finally, institutional safeguards and accountability. Effective civilian oversight, parliamentary scrutiny, transparent budgeting, and legal accountability mechanisms would be essential to pre-vent the merged force from acting autonomously or as a political actor.

Figure

In short, for the Artesh and IRGC to become a true citizen army, Iran would need fundamental depoliticization, structural unification, ideological neutrality, civilian control, and profes-sionalization, transforming both forces from parallel, politically embedded organizations into a single, accountable, professional military representing the nation rather than a faction.

A comprehensive transformation of Iran's military institutions requires a phased approach that gradually redefines authority, culture, and organizational practice. In the initial phase,

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spanning approximately zero to two years, the priority is to establish clear civilian oversight. This involves legally and institutionally affirming that both the Artesh and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are subordinate exclusively to the Ministry of Defense and to elected civilian au-thorities such as the president and parliament. Achieving this necessitates amendments to existing laws and regulations so that the IRGC no longer reports directly to the Supreme Leader in opera-tional matters. The principal challenge in this stage is the anticipated resistance from IRGC lead-ership and ideological hardliners who regard allegiance to the Supreme Leader as fundamental.

Between one and three years, the second phase focuses on depoliticizing command structures and recruitment practices. This requires the introduction of merit-based systems for recruitment and promotion across both forces, gradually eliminating ideologically driven appointments and reduc-ing the influence of Basij-linked recruitment channels. Standardized selection criteria, profession-al training, and evaluation metrics must be implemented to support this shift. Cultural resistance within the IRGC and political opposition from factions that depend on ideological loyalty are like-ly obstacles.

The third phase, projected to unfold over two to five years, aims to harmonize military doctrine and organizational structures. This includes merging operational doctrines, training programs, and command hierarchies, as well as consolidating overlapping units and creating integrated branches for land, air, naval, cyber, and missile operations. Joint committees composed of senior officers from both forces would be responsible for developing unified manuals, command rules, and train-ing curricula. Institutional rivalry and divergent operational philosophies—particularly between the IRGC's asymmetric warfare units and the Artesh's conventional forces—pose significant chal-lenges. From years three to seven, the fourth phase seeks to curtail the economic and political influence of the armed forces, especially the IRGC. This involves transferring IRGC-owned economic enter-prises to civilian oversight or privatization and restricting the political activities of both forces in elections and policymaking. A regulatory body would be required to audit defense-related eco-nomic holdings and enforce a strict separation between military and economic spheres. The IRGC's extensive and opaque financial networks are likely to generate entrenched resistance and potential corruption-related complications.

The fifth phase, spanning four to eight years, centers on the professionalization of military educa-tion and ethics. Unified military academies should be established to emphasize professional eth-ics, civic responsibility, and adherence to constitutional obligations, while reducing the promi-nence of revolutionary ideology in educational programs. Mixed training environments and joint officer schools would help integrate Artesh and IRGC cadets. However, ideological purists and influential alumni networks may resist these cultural reforms.

Between five and ten years, the sixth phase aims to broaden the social composition of the armed forces and strengthen their integration with the broader citizenry. Recruitment should reflect the diversity of Iranian society across regions, ethnicities, and social classes, rather than reinforcing factional or sectarian loyalties. National service incentives and transparent recruitment policies would support this objective. Resistance may arise from elite networks and regional patronage systems that risk losing influence over personnel selection.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The seventh phase, also projected for years five to ten, focuses on institutionalizing accountability and oversight. This requires the establishment of parliamentary committees, civilian auditing bod-ies, and legal mechanisms to monitor military operations, budgets, and compliance with national law. Public reporting requirements, transparent defense budgeting, and whistleblower protections would reinforce these oversight structures. Deeply ingrained secrecy within the IRGC and political factions reliant on military influence are likely to impede progress.

Finally, between eight and twelve years, the transformation must be consolidated and publicly affirmed. Remaining parallel command structures should be merged, and unified uniforms, insig-nia, and institutional branding should be introduced. National ceremonies and public communica-tion campaigns would help legitimize the concept of a unified citizen army that serves the nation rather than any particular faction or ideology. Persistent mistrust among IRGC veterans and poten-tial backlash from hardline groups may slow the final stages of implementation.

Overall, a full transition is expected to require ten to twelve years, with many stages overlapping. The success of this process depends on sustained political will, gradual cultural change, and a careful balancing of entrenched IRGC power with the imperatives of civilian authority.

Thus, Breaking down the barriers between the IRGC and the Artesh to create a unified, profession-al citizen army is one of the most politically and culturally sensitive challenges in Iran. These bar-riers are institutional, ideological, political, economic, and cultural, so a multi-pronged strategy is required.

Institutional barriers exist because the IRGC and Artesh have separate chains of command, doc-trines, and operational responsibilities. Integration requires joint command exercises and plan-ning, beginning with non-combat areas such as training, disaster response, or border patrol to build trust. Administrative structures should be gradually merged by aligning ranks, promotion criteria, and reporting hierarchies without forcing immediate full integration. Shared education programs in military academies and staff colleges can cultivate a common professional identity. The key challenge is institutional rivalry and fear of losing autonomy, which can be mitigated by offering incentives for cooperation and recognizing the IRGC's expertise in asymmetric warfare.

Ideological barriers stem from the IRGC's deep ties to revolutionary and religious ideology, while the Artesh is professionally neutral. Bridging this gap requires professional ethics curricula that emphasize loyalty to the constitution and nation rather than to a faction or ideology. Mission framing should focus on national defense and citizen protection as a unifying purpose. Cultural exchange programs can foster cross-service mentorship and shared ceremonial traditions. The key challenge is resistance from hardliners who see ideology as central to the IRGC's legitimacy, so gradual reframing of ideology as compatible with national duty is necessary.

Political barriers arise because the IRGC wields significant influence in government, elections, and internal security. Reducing this influence without destabilizing politics requires

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clear legal frameworks codifying the political neutrality of all military personnel, strengthened civilian over-sight by parliamentary and executive bodies, and the phased withdrawal of IRGC political actors into civilian institutions or advisory roles outside active command. The key challenge is the risk of backlash from factions benefiting from IRGC influence, so incremental implementation and political negotiation are critical.

Economic barriers are significant because the IRGC controls large sectors of Iran's strategic econ-omy, giving it autonomy and leverage. Integration demands transparency and civilian audit of IRGC business holdings, privatization or civilian management of economic assets, and compensa-tion or incentives to reduce resistance to economic reform. The key challenge is the IRGC's ex-tensive, opaque financial networks, which require phased and legally enforceable reforms.

Trust and cultural barriers, including mutual suspicion and differing service cultures, are major obstacles. These can be reduced through joint training and operations, team-building exercises, inter-service rotations, and transparent communication that clearly articulates the benefits of a unified force for both services.

Finally, a gradual, phased approach is essential. Breaking these barriers requires starting with low-stakes integration exercises, aligning doctrine, ranks, and ethics over several years, phasing out political and economic privileges slowly to reduce backlash, and maintaining flexibility to adjust reforms based on reactions from IRGC and Artesh personnel.

Overall, the IRGC exemplifies a hybrid institution combining military, economic, and ideological power. It enforces the Islamic Republic's doctrinal principles, sustains a semi-autonomous eco-nomic empire, and executes complex warfighting strategies that mix conventional, asymmetric, and proxy warfare. Its pervasive role ensures that political, economic, and security decisions in Iran are inseparable from the IRGC's strategic priorities, making it both a stabilizing and coercive force within the country and across the region.

Now, Iran's assertive regional posture, often characterized in contemporary discourse as a "warri-or ethos" or relentless pursuit of influence, is better understood as the outcome of a long-standing strategic culture shaped by historical experience, geopolitical insecurity, and the evolving relationship between rulers and the ruled. This orientation does not emerge spontaneously in the modern Islamic Republic; rather, it has roots extending back to Antiquity, when the Achae-menid, Parthian, and Sassanian empires faced both internal and external pressures that required sophisticated strategies of control, projection of authority, and legitimacy-building. Rulers relied on a combination of military strength, ideological authority, and administrative integration to maintain cohesion across a vast and culturally diverse territory. Imperial narratives emphasized both the protection of the realm and the moral and spiritual legitimacy of the sovereign, establish-ing a pattern in which security and governance were intertwined with elite ideology and social order.

Over centuries, this relationship between ruler and ruled reinforced a dual logic of authority and deterrence. Rulers cultivated both loyalty and fear, while subjects were integrated into networks of obligation, taxation, military service, and religious or cultural legitimacy. This historic pattern informed later Persianate and Islamic conceptions of governance, including

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the Safavid and Qajar periods, where the state leveraged religious ideology alongside military organization to consoli-date power. By the time of the modern Islamic Republic, the Revolutionary Guard embodies a continuation of these principles: it functions simultaneously as a military instrument, a guardian of ideological legitimacy, and a tool for social and political integration. Its regional campaigns, proxy networks, and asymmetric strategies are a reflection of a deeply ingrained logic of strategic depth and regime preservation, rooted not only in the vulnerabilities of the contemporary state but in millennia of Iranian experience in balancing internal control with external projection of au-thority.

Understanding Iran's behaviour in this historical light emphasizes that what some analysts de-scribe as an "incorrigible warrior mentality bend on regional dominance based on campaigns" is in fact a strategic culture shaped by centuries of geopolitical pressures, elite-ruler relation-ships, and the institutionalization of ideological authority. Transforming this orientation would require more than military or diplomatic measures; it would necessitate changes in the structural and social foundations of governance, including recalibrating the relationship between the ruling elite and society, fostering accountability, and reshaping the narratives that link national security, ideological legitimacy, and regional projection. Only by addressing these deep historical and insti-tutional roots could Iran's approach shift from a default posture of assertive defense and influence toward a more balanced, citizen-oriented model of statecraft.

6.9 The role of EU-Iran and WTO Membership

The relationship between the European Union and Iran has the potential to shape Iranian economic reforms and integration into the global economy, even though it currently lacks a formal contrac-tual framework such as a trade agreement. The EU does not have a bilateral trade agreement with Iran, and trade between them is subject to the EU's general import regime because Iran is not a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Despite this, the EU has maintained a long standing policy of encouraging Iran's accession to the WTO as a means of promoting regula-tory transparency, legal predictability, and integration into a rules based trading system. WTO membership would oblige Iran to adopt internationally recognised trade norms, reduce tariff and non tariff barriers, and align domestic economic regulations with global standards, which could foster competition, attract foreign direct investment, and spur market reforms. At the same time, the EU's support for WTO accession signals to Iranian policymakers that deeper economic re-forms are linked to broader engagement with key trading partners.

While formal EU–Iran trade and investment cooperation remain limited, there are areas where both sides have expressed interest in technical and sectoral cooperation, such as agriculture, transport, and energy regulation, which could help modernise Iranian economic institutions. The absence of a comprehensive contractual relationship means that these interactions are often trans-actional rather than institutionalised, limiting the EU's leverage to condition economic access on reform commitments. Nevertheless, the EU's broader strategy has framed economic engagement as part of a balanced approach that includes diplomacy on nuclear issues, regional security, and human rights concerns. EU statements have reiterated that progress in economic relations and WTO accession prospects are interconnected with advancements in political dialogue and adher-ence to international norms.

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Iran's WTO accession bid, which has been discussed intermittently since the 1990s, reflects Teh-ran's interest in integrating with the global trading system, but the process is protracted and com-plicated by geopolitical tensions, sanctions, and domestic economic policy priorities. WTO mem-bership discussions force Iran to confront internal regulatory barriers, such as state dominance in key sectors, subsidies, and opaque governance structures, potentially catalysing domestic reform debates. In theory, WTO accession would require Tehran to liberalise trade, reduce protectionist measures, and strengthen the rule of law in commercial contexts, creating incentives for broader administrative and institutional reform. A more transparent economy anchored in multi lateral rules could benefit consumers and firms alike by lowering costs, expanding market access, and improving legal certainty.

The EU's trade relations with Iran have fluctuated over time, partly reflecting developments in the nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and sanctions regimes. While EU sanc-tions remain in place in response to human rights abuses and Iran's regional policies, limited trade persists, with total goods trade between the EU and Iran in recent years valued in the low billions of euros. Even under these constraints, the volume of trade underscores underlying commercial interdependencies, especially in machinery, transport equipment, and agricultural products. The persistence of such trade suggests that both sides see economic engagement as beneficial, but it also highlights that without formal agreements or WTO anchoring, bilateral relations remain sub-ject to political volatility.

Iran's pursuit of free trade agreements with other partners, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, illustrates alternative routes for modernization and integration into regional markets, potentially creating competitive pressures that could encourage domestic reforms. These regional agreements may create spillover effects by exposing Iranian firms to international competition and best prac-tices, improving productivity and regulatory alignment. Economic actors within Iran, particularly those involved in export oriented sectors, may view WTO accession and deeper economic en-gagement with Europe as ways to unlock new markets and technologies. From the EU perspective, supporting WTO accession and conditional engagement can serve as tools to promote legal and economic reforms that align with European expectations of transparency, rule based trade, and adherence to international norms.

At the same time, structural challenges in Iran's economy — including state dominance in key industries, limited property rights protections, and weak judicial enforcement of commercial law — complicate the reform process. WTO accession would require Tehran to address many of these institutional deficiencies, potentially reinforcing internal constituencies pushing for legal and ad-ministrative modernization. Domestic reform advocates in Iran often cite WTO integration as a catalyst for improving market governance, enhancing competition, and reducing corruption. For the EU, encouraging WTO membership is part of a broader effort to incentivise structural reforms that go beyond trade liberalisation to encompass governance standards and economic openness.

Ultimately, the interplay between EU–Iran economic relations and the WTO accession process highlights the potential for international economic engagement to spur reform in Iran, even in the absence of formal contractual relations. While political and security considerations continue to limit the scope of cooperation, the encouragement of WTO

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membership and selective sectoral collaboration signal recognition that economic modernization is tied to broader governance and legal reforms.

6.10 Achievements and failures of the Iranian Revolution

Iranian society is deeply divided along generational, geographic, economic, and ideological lines, producing a complex landscape of competing interests and visions for the country's future. One of the most visible cleavages is generational, as the young population, comprising over 60% of Iran's 88 million people, is largely urbanized, well-educated, and digitally connected, having been born after the 1979 revolution. This demographic faces high unemployment and underemployment, estimated between 25 and 40 percent for young adults, coupled with rising living costs and eco-nomic hardship, leading to widespread disillusionment and fueling social, economic, and political protests. Youth movements, including participation in the 2022 protests, challenge theocratic rule and demand reforms in governance, personal freedoms, and civil liberties. Roughly 22 percent of Iranians are aged 15 to 29, and the large proportion under 30 creates a pronounced generational tension with the aging political elite. Highly connected and tech-savvy, young Iranians use social media to circumvent censorship and advocate for social freedoms, such as relaxed dress codes and access to cultural spaces, while many consider emigration due to economic constraints and social restrictions. Young men must also contend with two years of mandatory military service, further contributing to frustration and the sense of social limbo. Despite these challenges, Iranian youth remain the most crucial, active, and vocal segment of the opposition, representing a potent force for change within society.

Another major cleavage exists along geographic lines in the form of the center-periphery divide, where the Persian-dominated political, economic, and cultural core, centered on Tehran and the central provinces, exerts authority over marginalized, ethnically diverse border regions. Peripheral provinces, including Kurdistan, Sistan-Baluchistan, and Khuzestan, experience higher poverty, limited infrastructure, and greater political repression, which fuels regional protests and anti-regime activism. The core-periphery model thrives on centralized planning that concentrates re-sources in the heartland while draining investment from the periphery, even when these regions possess valuable natural resources. Ethnic and sectarian discrimination privileges Persian Shiite identity, creating structural inequalities and fueling long-standing grievances in marginalized re-gions.

Governance in Iran is dominated by the Shia clergy, whose authority under velayat-e faqih gives the Supreme Leader and senior clerics control over key institutions, the judiciary, and state-run companies. Through bonyads and affiliated enterprises, the clergy exerts substantial economic influence, reinforcing ideological authority and shaping social programs. The bazaaris, traditional merchants historically allied with clerics, mediate between the state and communities, reinforcing social norms and providing both economic and political stability. Together, clergy-led economic networks and bazaar influence maintain loyalty, constrain reform, and sustain conservative social and religious values. These structures interact with governance, human rights, and rule-of-law challenges, as youth and peripheral populations often confront restrictions on expression, political participation, and access to justice. Social, economic, and political grievances intersect, producing recurring protests that highlight generational, geographic, and institutional tensions. Iran's socie-tal landscape reflects the

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intertwining of clerical authority, economic control, youth activism, re-gional inequality, and contested governance, shaping both political stability and the potential for reform.

The relationship between the European Union and Iran has the potential to shape Iranian economic reforms and integration into the global economy, even though it currently lacks a formal contrac-tual framework such as a trade agreement. The EU does not have a bilateral trade agreement with Iran, and trade between them is subject to the EU's general import regime because Iran is not a member of the World Trade Organization. Despite this, the EU has maintained a long-standing policy of encouraging Iran's accession to the WTO as a means of promoting regulatory transpar-ency, legal predictability, and integration into a rules-based trading system. WTO membership would oblige Iran to adopt internationally recognized trade norms, reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers, and align domestic economic regulations with global standards, which could foster com-petition, attract foreign direct investment, and spur market reforms. At the same time, the EU's support for WTO accession signals to Iranian policymakers that deeper economic reforms are linked to broader engagement with key trading partners. While formal EU–Iran trade and invest-ment cooperation remain limited, there are areas where both sides have expressed interest in tech-nical and sectoral cooperation, such as agriculture, transport, and energy regulation, which could help modernize Iranian economic institutions. The absence of a comprehensive contractual rela-tionship means that these interactions are often transactional rather than institutionalized, limiting the EU's leverage to condition economic access on reform commitments. Nevertheless, the EU's broader strategy has framed economic engagement as part of a balanced approach that includes diplomacy on nuclear issues, regional security, and human rights concerns. EU statements have reiterated that progress in economic relations and WTO accession prospects are interconnected with advancements in political dialogue and adherence to international norms.

Iran's WTO accession bid, which has been discussed intermittently since the 1990s, reflects Teh-ran's interest in integrating with the global trading system, but the process is protracted and com-plicated by geopolitical tensions, sanctions, and domestic economic policy priorities. WTO mem-bership discussions force Iran to confront internal regulatory barriers, such as state dominance in key sectors, subsidies, and opaque governance structures, potentially catalyzing domestic reform debates. In theory, WTO accession would require Tehran to liberalize trade, reduce protectionist measures, and strengthen the rule of law in commercial contexts, creating incentives for broader administrative and institutional reform. A more transparent economy anchored in multilateral rules could benefit consumers and firms alike by lowering costs, expanding market access, and improving legal certainty. The EU's trade relations with Iran have fluctuated over time, partly reflecting developments in the nuclear agreement and sanctions regimes. While EU sanctions re-main in place in response to human rights abuses and Iran's regional policies, limited trade per-sists, demonstrating underlying commercial interdependencies. Even under these constraints, trade in machinery, transport equipment, and agricultural products illustrates potential benefits of further engagement. Iran's pursuit of free trade agreements with other partners, such as the Eura-sian Economic Union, creates alternative pathways for modernization and integration into region-al markets, potentially creating competitive pressures that encourage domestic reforms. Economic actors within Iran, particularly those involved in export-oriented sectors, may view WTO acces-sion and deeper economic engagement with Europe as ways to unlock new

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markets and technolo-gies. From the EU perspective, supporting WTO membership and conditional engagement serves as a tool to promote legal and economic reforms that align with European expectations of trans-parency, rule-based trade, and adherence to international norms. Structural challenges, including state dominance in key industries, limited property rights protections, and weak judicial enforce-ment of commercial law, complicate the reform process, but accession discussions provide pres-sure points for institutional modernization. Ultimately, the interplay between EU–Iran economic relations and the WTO accession process highlights the potential for international economic en-gagement to spur reform in Iran, even in the absence of formal contractual relations. While politi-cal and security considerations continue to limit the scope of cooperation, encouragement of WTO membership and selective sectoral collaboration signals recognition that economic modernization is tied to broader governance and legal reforms.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps occupies a central role in Iranian political, economic, and military life, functioning as both a security force and a socio-economic actor. Established after the 1979 revolution, the IRGC's primary mission was to safeguard the ideological and political goals of the Islamic Republic, serving as a parallel military institution to the regular Iranian armed forc-es. Over time, its influence expanded far beyond defense, permeating domestic politics, media, business, and education, giving it an outsized role in shaping governance and societal norms. Eco-nomically, the IRGC controls a vast portion of Iran's sanctioned and domestic economy through affiliated conglomerates, construction firms, and state-backed enterprises, many organized under the Khatam al-Anbiya construction base and related entities. These networks operate across oil, gas, telecommunications, real estate, and manufacturing sectors, generating revenue streams inde-pendent of formal state budgets. The IRGC's economic reach allows it to fund political allies, so-cial programs, and military expansion while circumventing international sanctions, creating a semi-autonomous sanctioned economy that supports both regime stability and strategic opera-tions. Doctrinally, the IRGC is guided by the principle of defending the Islamic Revolution and extending Iran's ideological influence regionally. Its operational doctrine integrates conventional military planning with asymmetrical strategies, irregular warfare, proxy networks, and influence operations. Through its Quds Force, the IRGC projects power beyond Iran's borders, supporting allied militias in countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. This combination of convention-al, irregular, and proxy warfare allows Tehran to deter adversaries, expand strategic depth, and exercise influence without direct confrontation with superior military powers. In addition to ex-ternal operations, the IRGC functions internally as a political and social enforcer. It maintains intelligence, security, and law enforcement capabilities, including control over militias such as the Basij, which monitor and suppress domestic dissent. This dual role—defending the state external-ly while enforcing ideological compliance internally—makes the IRGC a central pillar of regime survival. Sanctions targeting the IRGC and its economic subsidiaries have attempted to constrain its activities, but the organization has adapted through clandestine trade networks, financial in-termediaries, and regional partnerships, maintaining its capacity to operate both economically and militarily. Overall, the IRGC exemplifies a hybrid institution combining military, economic, and ideological power, enforcing the Islamic Republic's doctrinal principles, sustaining a semi-autonomous economic empire, and executing complex warfighting strategies that mix convention-al, asymmetric, and proxy warfare.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 had multiple overlapping objectives. The central and immediate goal was to remove Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and end the monarchy, which was widely per-ceived as corrupt, repressive, and excessively Westernized. A strong desire to reduce U.S. and Western influence in Iran's political, economic, and cultural affairs was central to revolutionary rhetoric. Led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution also sought to replace secular monarchy with a governance system based on Shiite Islamic principles, incorporating moral and religious authori-ty into state structures. Revolutionary discourse promised greater economic equality, support for the poor, and redistribution of wealth, including reform of land ownership and state involvement in the economy. National sovereignty and anti-imperialism were emphasized, with Iran aiming to assert independence in foreign policy and support regional Islamist movements aligned with its ideological worldview. The revolution successfully dismantled the monarchy and established the Islamic Republic, achieving the primary goal of regime transformation. Through the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, the revolution entrenched Shia clerical authority over political, judicial, and mili-tary institutions. The revolution fostered mass participation in politics and society, mobilizing previously marginalized groups, including bazaaris, students, and religious communities. Iran re-gained control over some domestic policies, resisted certain Western pressures, and projected re-gional influence, particularly after the U.S. embassy hostage crisis in 1979–81. Islamic identity became central to the state, influencing law, education, and social norms, and reshaping the coun-try's cultural and moral frameworks.

Despite these achievements, the revolution faced substantial limitations and failures. Economic mismanagement, inefficiency, inflation, and sanctions-induced isolation undermined promises of social justice. The revolution quickly moved toward consolidating power, suppressing dissent, and institutionalizing control through the Revolutionary Guard, the Basij, and clerically dominated institutions, eliminating political pluralism. Ethnic, sectarian, and regional minorities, including Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Azeris, continued to face marginalization, showing a failure to deliver equity across Iran's diverse population. Industrial and technological development slowed due to war, sanctions, and prioritization of ideological projects over market-oriented economic reforms. The revolution's policies also isolated Iran diplomatically and economically, limiting trade, in-vestment, and regional cooperation. Centralization of religious authority under velayat-e faqih created a system where dissent could be easily suppressed. Security-driven governance relied on the IRGC and Basij militias to maintain ideological conformity and political control. Ideological rigidity fused religion and state, prioritizing doctrinal obedience over pragmatic governance or popular accountability. Iranian society has historically valorized martial virtues, self-sacrifice, and resilience, and the revolution drew on this ethos. The war with Iraq reinforced the narrative of a resistant nation defending its sovereignty and faith, while the IRGC and Basij militarized citi-zens as both ideological and military actors. This focus on warfare and ideological struggle di-verted attention from institutional development, economic modernization, and broader political liberalization.

The revolution has largely institutionalized itself, with clerical and security institutions firmly in control for over four decades. Persistent challenges including youth dissatisfaction, social unrest, economic stagnation, and regional pressures indicate that revolutionary legitimacy is under stress. While the state maintains authority, the original ideals of social justice, political freedom, and participatory governance remain unfulfilled for large segments of society.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Pressures from internal demographics, global integration, and economic imperatives could spur reform, adaptation, or fragmentation in the future. The Iranian Revolution achieved its core goal of regime change and reshaped the ideological, political, and social landscape, but it has failed in delivering sustainable economic development, pluralism, and equitable governance. Its turn to authoritarianism was a product of ideological centralization and security concerns, reinforced by a martial and revolu-tionary ethos. While the regime remains resilient, the original revolutionary promises remain con-tested by youth, minorities, and reformists. Overall, Iran today reflects the intertwining of genera-tional, geographic, economic, and ideological cleavages, clerical authority, bazaar influence, IRGC power, and the pressures of globalization and international engagement. The country's fu-ture trajectory depends on how these social, political, and economic forces interact, balancing au-thoritarian resilience with pressures for reform, modernization, and social justice.

6.11 Pilot Project on Khuzestan

To fully grasp the strategic sensitivities surrounding Khuzestan and the rationale behind a GCC+1 pilot initiative, one must revisit the historical arc of Saddam Hussein's ambitions and the endur-ing legacy of Iraq's coveting of Iran's oil-rich southwest. Khuzestan, with its dense Arab popula-tion and vast energy reserves, has long been perceived as both a geopolitical prize and a vulnera-bility in Iran's territorial architecture.

Saddam's fixation on Khuzestan was not merely territorial—it was ideological, economic, and strategic. In the late 1970s, as Iran reeled from revolutionary upheaval, Saddam saw an opportuni-ty to assert Iraq's regional dominance. He framed Khuzestan as a rightful extension of Arab lands, invoking pan-Arabist rhetoric and claiming to champion the rights of its Arab inhabitants. But beneath the ideological veneer lay a more pragmatic calculus: Khuzestan housed the bulk of Iran's oil infrastructure, including the Abadan refinery and key pipeline networks. Control over this re-gion would have granted Iraq a decisive energy advantage and crippled Iran's economic lifeline.

The 1980 invasion of Iran, which marked the beginning of the Iran–Iraq War, was in part driven by this ambition. Saddam's forces targeted Khuzestan early, aiming to seize its cities and oil fields. While initial advances were made, Iranian resistance proved formidable, and the war devolved into a brutal stalemate. The failure to annex Khuzestan not only exposed the limits of Iraqi mili-tary power but also entrenched Iran's resolve to fortify its southwestern frontier—physically, po-litically, and psychologically. Today, Khuzestan remains a strategic flashpoint. Its proximity to Basra, its ecological fragility, and its ethnic complexity make it a zone of both opportunity and anxiety. Iran's sense of insecuri-ty in Khuzestan is shaped by memories of invasion, fears of separatism, and concerns over exter-nal manipulation. Addressing these anxieties requires more than rhetorical assurances—it de-mands a structured, multilateral framework that integrates Iran's legitimate concerns into a broad-er regional architecture of cooperation.

The proposed GCC+1 pilot project offers such a framework. It begins with sustained political and diplomatic engagement. Regular dialogue platforms—anchored in annual summits and thematic working groups—can institutionalize trust and provide a venue for addressing

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grievances. Confi-dence-building measures, such as reciprocal visits by diplomats and military officials, can human-ize relations and reduce misperceptions.

Economic development is central to this strategy. Joint infrastructure and energy projects in Khuzestan, co-financed by GCC and EU stakeholders, can revitalize the local economy and reduce alienation. Investment incentives targeting EU and Gulf firms would not only create jobs but also embed Khuzestan within a regional economic ecosystem, diluting the appeal of separatist narra-tives. Security cooperation must be pragmatic and layered. Border security initiatives—ranging from joint patrols to intelligence sharing—can mitigate cross-border threats and build operational syn-ergy. Training and equipping local security forces ensures that order is maintained by actors root-ed in the community, not imposed from afar.

Cultural and social initiatives are equally vital. Exchange programs, educational curricula, and cultural festivals can foster mutual understanding and counteract divisive propaganda. Humanitar-ian assistance, particularly in healthcare and housing, addresses immediate needs and signals goodwill. A joint disaster relief fund would institutionalize solidarity in times of crisis. Environmental cooperation is perhaps the most urgent domain. Water scarcity, pollution, and land degradation threaten both Khuzestan and Basra. Collaborative water management projects, refor-estation efforts, and pollution control initiatives can transform ecological vulnerability into a plat-form for regional resilience.

Implementation must be rigorous. A steering committee composed of GCC, EU, and Iranian repre-sentatives should oversee the plan, ensuring accountability and adaptability. Regular monitoring and public communication will build trust and maintain momentum. Iran's counterpart to this initiative must be equally comprehensive. By proposing joint environ-mental projects, promoting trade and investment in energy and agriculture, and engaging in coor-dinated security efforts, Iran can demonstrate its commitment to regional stability. Cultural and educational exchanges, infrastructure development, and people-to-people diplomacy will further embed Khuzestan and Basra within a shared regional narrative.

In sum, the legacy of Saddam's failed annexation of Khuzestan underscores the dangers of unilat-eralism and the necessity of cooperative security. The GCC+1 pilot project offers a pathway to transform a contested frontier into a corridor of collaboration. It is not merely a response to Iran's insecurities—it is a blueprint for a more integrated and resilient Gulf order.

6.12 Fundamental reforms are necessary in Iran

Fundamental reform in Iran requires recognition of the structural weaknesses in governance and the excessive concentration of power in unaccountable institutions, a problem that can be under-stood through Dahl's insight about pluralistic competition and accountability. Genuine civilian oversight of all branches of government, especially institutions that have acted outside legal ac-countability, must be anchored in local traditions of shura (consultation), a principle rooted in early Islamic practice that emphasizes collective responsibility. Reform must start with constitu-tional clarification that constrains unbounded authority while preserving legitimacy, drawing on Muhammad Baqir al Sadr's (Iraqi Shia jurist and philosopher) idea that khilafat al insan (human stewardship of governance) is both a right and an obligation given by God to the community, not the monopoly of a single office or faction.

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Al Sadr argued that governance should serve justice and collective well being and that political authority should be accountable to the people through moral and legal means, challenging both Western capitalism and authoritarianism simultaneously. Strengthening the judiciary requires professionalization and insulation from political pressure, in part by reviving Islamic legal thought that emphasizes fairness and accountability rather than arbi-trary rule.

Legal protections for freedom of expression, association, and assembly should be framed within both universal human rights and Islamic concepts of adl (justice) and ihsan (ethical excellence), providing cultural grounding for pluralism. Political parties and movements must be allowed to operate freely under a reformed constitutional order that views political engagement as a legiti-mate extension of shura, not a threat, and that accepts ideological diversity as compatible with Islamic governance. Electoral reforms, including independent oversight and transparent proce-dures, should build on historical Muslim consultative models rather than mimic only Western electoral engineering. Mechanisms for recall, impeachment, and accountability of public officials should be reconceived in light of Quranic principles about trusteeship and stewardship, so that power is not seen as sacrosanct but as a responsibility to those governed. Transition from ideolo-gy driven policymaking toward evidence based governance must incorporate indigenous demo-cratic discourse grounded in Islamic ethics and local political theory, not simply import Western technocracy.

Civil military relations must be rebalanced so that security institutions serve the nation as a whole, reflecting not only Huntington's model of civilian control but also Islamic juristic critiques of the misuse of force against the community. The political and economic influence of the IRGC and similar formations should be reined in by subjecting them to civilian economic regulation, aligning with al Sadr's critique of concentrated power that corrupts social welfare obligations. Transparency in public finance, budget allocations, and contract awarding can limit opaque pat-ronage networks that weaken governance and social trust, echoing Olson's emphasis on institu-tional accountability. Stakeholder-based approaches to the legislative train could strengthen gov-ernance and increase pluralism. A comprehensive anti corruption framework should make an-ti corruption an ethical Islamic commitment as well as a legal requirement. Economic reform must foster equitable opportunity and reduce monopolistic control, drawing on Islamic economic principles that promote wealth redistribution through zakat and social welfare, something Iran excels in the Muslim world.

Figure Women, Life , Freedom : Women's rights, Dignity of life, and Socio-political liberty.

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(Zan, Zendegi, Azadi). ”زندگی، آزادی ،
Jin, Jiyan, Azadî
Qadın, Həyat, Azadlıq
المرأة، الحياة، الحرية
Aýal, Durmuş, Azatlyk
Կին, Կյանք, Ազատություն
נשים, חיים, חירות

Sanctions mitigation strategies should be paired with domestic reforms that enhance market effi-ciency, support small businesses, and prevent economically powerful groups from monopolizing access to state resources. Social inclusion policies ensuring equitable access to education, healthcare, and employment must recognize gender equity as harmonious with Islamic concep-tions of justice. Women's legal rights should be firmly protected, grounded in a Shia scholarly tradition that sees gender justice as part of ethical governance. Minority groups and sects should be recognized constitutionally, with guarantees against discrimination and with structures that allow representation in governance. Civic education should be strengthened, emphasizing Islamic principles of rights and duties as well as global norms of governance, so citizens understand both their religious and civic identities.

The conceptual foundations of human rights in Iran are rooted in a complex interplay of pre-Islamic ethical norms, Islamic jurisprudential theory, and modern constitutional innovations. In the Achaemenid and Sassanid periods, governance was guided by Zoroastrian notions of asha (truth and cosmic order), which emphasized justice, moral responsibility, and the protection of subject peoples' cultural and religious autonomy. Royal inscriptions and administrative edicts, such as the Cyrus Cylinder and Behistun inscriptions, articulate a proto-legal recognition of indi-vidual dignity, religious tolerance, and protection of property, forming an indigenous moral and political framework that prefigures later codifications of rights.

Table

Constitutional Article	**Content / Guarantee**	**Indigenous Jurisprudential / Ethical Root**	**Implication for Governance & Rights**
Article 19	All people of Iran, regardless of ethnicity or tribe, enjoy equal rights; race, color, language, and similar distinctions do not create privilege.	**'Adl (Justice)** and **Ummah equality** in Islamic ethics – rejection of racial or tribal superiority; Qur'anic principle of human equality before God.	Establishes a foundational **anti-ethnic discrimination principle**; supports national unity and equal citizenship across Iran's diverse communities.
Article 20	All citizens, both men and women, enjoy equal protection of the law and political, economic, social, and cultural rights **in conformity**	**'Adl (Justice)** in Shi'a jurisprudence; governance must apply law fairly while remaining consistent with Islamic norms.	Provides constitutional grounding for **legal equality**, but allows **religious criteria to shape interpretation of rights**.

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	with Islamic criteria.		
Article 23	Investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden; no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a belief.	**Karamat al-Insan (Human dignity)** and moral accountability only before God.	Protects **freedom of belief and conscience**; limits ideological persecution by the state.
Article 24 *(relevant addition)*	Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when detrimental to fundamental principles of Islam or public rights.	**Shura (consultation)** and **ethical accountability** in discourse.	Allows public debate and criticism but within **religious-normative boundaries**.
Article 26	Formation of parties, associations, and professional organizations is permitted provided they do not violate Islamic principles or national independence.	**Shura (consultation)** and collective participation in governance.	Enables **civil society and political organization**, while keeping them within Islamic constitutional limits.
Articles 28–29	Right to choose employment; right to social security, welfare, healthcare, and support in cases of unemployment or disability.	**Maslaha (public interest)** and **social justice ('adl)** in Islamic governance traditions.	Establishes the state's responsibility for **social welfare and economic justice**.
Article 30	Government must provide free education up to secondary level and expand higher education.	**Karamat** and **'Ilm (knowledge)** as moral duties in Islamic ethics.	Connects governance with **human development and empowerment through education**.
Article 43	Principles governing the national economy, including elimination of poverty and meeting basic needs.	**Maslaha (public welfare)** and Islamic social justice traditions.	Grounds **economic justice and redistribution** as ethical obligations of the state.
Article 57	Separation of powers (legislative, executive, judiciary) under the supervision of the Supreme Leader.	**Wilayat al-Faqih** combined with **fiduciary leadership** traditions in Shi'a thought.	Creates a **hybrid constitutional system**: institutional separation of powers within religious oversight.
Article 110	Defines powers and duties of the Supreme Leader (e.g., command of armed forces,	**Wilayat al-Faqih**, **'Adl**, and **guardianship of the community**.	Establishes the **highest authority in governance**, justified as ethical guardianship rather than

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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	appointment powers).		personal sovereignty.
Articles 113–122	President is the head of the executive branch and responsible for implementing the constitution.	**Trusteeship (amanah)** and accountability principles in Islamic governance.	Provides **administrative leadership and political accountability** within the constitutional system.

Summary Insight:

This mapping shows that the Iranian constitutional framework does not merely replicate Western legal rights; instead, it translates indigenous jurisprudential concepts—justice (‘adl), human dignity (karamat), public interest (maslaha), and consultation (shura)—into legal provisions. Rights to equality, expression, education, social welfare, and political participation are ethically and religiously grounded, offering a framework for governance that is accountable, pluralistic, and culturally resonant.

aken together, these constitutional provisions create a **distinctive model of governance** in which legal rights, political authority, and public responsibilities are framed within an explicitly ethical and religious constitutional order.

First, **rights are constitutionally recognized but normatively framed**. The Iranian Constitution affirms a range of civil, political, and social rights for citizens, including equality before the law, freedom of belief, social welfare, and participation in public life. However, these rights are not conceived as entirely autonomous or absolute. Instead, they are interpreted and exercised **within the framework of Islamic moral and legal principles**. This means that rights are understood not only as individual entitlements but also as responsibilities embedded within a broader moral community governed by Islamic norms.

Second, **governance is conceived as ethical rather than purely procedural**. Political authority in the constitutional framework derives not solely from elections or institutional procedures but from the ethical obligation of rulers to uphold justice, protect the public welfare, and govern in accordance with Islamic principles. Leadership is therefore viewed as a form of **moral trusteeship**, in which rulers act as guardians responsible for maintaining justice (*‘adl*), safeguarding social order, and promoting the well-being of the community.

Third, **social justice constitutes a central constitutional obligation of the state**. Several constitutional provisions emphasize the responsibility of government to ensure the material and social welfare of citizens. These include commitments to employment, social security, healthcare, education, and the elimination of poverty. Such responsibilities reflect the ethical principle of **public interest (*maslaha*)** and the broader Islamic emphasis on protecting the vulnerable and promoting equitable distribution of resources.

Finally, **participatory elements coexist with religious oversight**. The constitutional system incorporates mechanisms associated with participatory governance, including elections, political associations, and public discourse. At the same time, these mechanisms operate under the supervision of institutions designed to ensure conformity with Islamic law and constitutional principles. As a result, civil society participation, political debate, and

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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institutional governance occur within a framework where **religious legitimacy and ethical accountability shape the boundaries of political action**.

In combination, these elements produce a constitutional structure that blends **modern institutional governance with Islamic ethical and jurisprudential foundations**, creating a model in which legal rights, public authority, and social responsibilities are closely inter-connectted. In practice, this boils down to a deliberative space oriented towards strengthening of governance and more pluralist policy-making systems in the interest of greater accounta-bility and participatory governance, something that is universal to all Islamicate countries except that the arbiter in Iran are the Bayt Rahbar and the clerical establishment instead of the palace and the government. Thus Iran is a theocracy where religion is used to reinforce the implementation of rights where justice dictates the Shah and his government should have delivered. No social movement, however, has survived without strong leadership and good governance. Practice is not alwys pratical especially if you are subject to sanctions and nobody is omniscient not even the guardian jurist or the prophet kings pretending to know better in Teheran.

6.13. Is Iran ruled by degenerated pussy shocked mosque democrats?

The advent of Islam introduced an additional juridical and ethical layer, particularly through Shia jurisprudence, which foregrounds ‘adl’ (justice), karamat (human dignity), shura (consultative governance), and maslaha (public welfare). Indigenous Islamic jurisprudential discourse, exem-plified by thinkers such as Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Allama Hilli, conceptualizes human rights not as abstract universal claims but as obligations emanating from divine justice and social ethics. These principles prescribe that rulers exercise authority as trustees accountable to both God and the community, emphasizing ethical stewardship, protection of the oppressed, and the equitable distribution of resources.

The Safavid and Qajar eras represent an operationalization of these principles within centralized governance structures, though often constrained by authoritarian prerogatives. The Persian Con-stitutional Revolution (1906–1911) institutionalized the convergence of Islamic jurisprudence and modern legal principles, producing the Constitution and Supplementary Fundamental Laws, which codified rule of law, legal equality, and citizen protections while embedding the moral legitimacy of governance in Shia ethical precepts. These legal innovations reflect an indig-enous negotiation between universalizing modern rights frameworks and culturally situated juris-prudential principles.

During the Pahlavi era, state-led modernization introduced Western legal and administrative codes, extending civil and political rights within a secular bureaucratic framework, yet often sub-ordinating these rights to state authority. The post-1979 Islamic Republic Constitution repre-sents an explicit attempt to merge human rights protections with Shia jurisprudential ethics. Arti-cles affirm equality before the law, protection of life, education, and social welfare while framing political and civil liberties within the bounds of Islamic principles. Contemporary scholars and activists argue that rights are legitimate to the extent that they serve the public interest (maslaha) and uphold human dignity (karamat), linking ethical governance with citizen em-powerment.

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Contemporary movements, exemplified by the 2022–2023 protests and the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" (Zan, Zendegi, Azadi), demonstrate a revival of indigenous ethical and jurisprudential rationales for human rights claims. These mobilizations articulate a normative vision in which rule of law, governance accountability, and social justice are grounded both in Shia ethical im-peratives and universal human rights ideals. Thus, the Iranian trajectory illustrates an enduring synthesis: pre-Islamic moral order, Shia jurisprudential theory, and constitutional codification converge to produce a culturally embedded, ethically grounded, and legally articulated framework for human rights.

Curriculum reform in schools and universities should stress critical thinking, constitutional awareness, and ethical reasoning rooted in Islamic intellectual heritage, as advocated by reformist thinkers like Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari, who saw Islamic ethics as integral to public life and governance. Freedom of the press and access to independent media must be guaranteed under law, drawing on Islamic discourse that honors truth and accountability, so that public debate can flourish. Civil society organizations, community associations, and professional bodies should be legally protected as legitimate arenas for public deliberation, echoing Islamic historical institu-tions of endowment (waqf) and community governance. Decentralization of political power to local councils can improve governance responsiveness and reflect historic traditions of local Is-lamic governance. Revenue sharing mechanisms should be instituted so that local authorities have resources to meet community needs efficiently and transparently.

Legal reforms should clarify the relationship between religious authority and political administra-tion, ensuring that clerical guidance enriches ethical discourse but does not override constitutional processes. Mechanisms for public consultation on major policy decisions can enhance legitimacy and reduce social tensions, drawing on Islamic consultative traditions. Public service reforms should professionalize bureaucracies, moving away from factional patronage toward merit-based systems that reflect both Islamic meritocracy and modern administrative principles. Merit based career progression in civil service must replace loyalty-based systems that distort governance. Electoral laws should ensure broad representation and consensus building, facilitating pluralism rooted in the diversity of Muslim communities. Emergency and special courts should be phased out in favor of civilian judicial structures that uphold equal justice for all. National security strat-egy should be depoliticized, with civilian, academic, and professional input, ensuring defense pol-icy serves collective peace and stability.

Defense spending should be subject to transparent oversight and auditing, reflecting Islamic ethi-cal imperatives about stewardship of communal resources. Security forces need training in consti-tutional law, human rights, and community relations, synthesizing Islamic justice norms with in-ternational standards. Integration of varied security formations into a professional, unified force would strengthen national defense while reducing factional power. Extraterritorial proxy networks and militant engagements should be reevaluated in light of national interests and legal accounta-bility, not only ideological expansion. Gradual normalization of diplomatic relations with neighbors can reduce regional tensions and create incentives for internal reform. Economic diversification policies should reduce dependence on hydrocarbons and support sustainable development aligned with Islamic ethical economic frameworks. Investment in technology and infrastructure should be transparent and merit

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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based, reflecting inclusive principles. Anti monopoly and anti rent seeking laws must be enforced to limit capture by elites. Public participation in economic planning can enhance legitimacy and re-duce grievances. Transparency in social welfare programs will build trust. Media reforms should allow investigative journalism to expose abuses, harmonizing free inquiry with ethical respect. Legal protections for whistleblowers should make accountability a cultural norm. Gradual reduc-tion of ideological indoctrination in state institutions will foster a more inclusive society. Sup-porting independent policy institutes rooted in Muslim intellectual traditions can enrich evi-dence based governance. International cooperation in human rights, trade, and security can pro-vide external incentives for reform while respecting Islamic sovereignty. Phased implementation starting with constitutional and institutional reforms can make changes sustainable. Continuous evaluation mechanisms should monitor progress and adapt strategies as needed. Transparent communication of reforms to the public will build trust. Ultimately, inclusive transformation in Iran requires concurrent legal, economic, political, and cultural reforms grounded in both Islamic theory — including al Sadr's emphasis on justice and stewardship — and selected universal gov-ernance principles to create accountable, participatory governance.

Summary

Iran's sub-regional scheming appears prima facie geared towards implementing a UN Mandate following the latest Gulf War against Saddam, the oil thief from Tikrit. Yet, Hope was more likely a bid for building –up a "strong region" under Iranian leadership following the successful preven-tion of a US-Israeli Kurdish wedge into the Farsi-speaking lands, recentered around maximizing the return to power from Iran's unique geographical station at the confluence of Central Asia, South Asia , the Persian Gulf as backed up by its Shia clients in Lebanon , Palestine , Iraq and Yemen not to mention the alliance with Syria, a revisionist defensive alliance geared towards countering Western encroachment on the region, enabling at last a bid for dominance of the re-gion. Iran once more due to US-EU zig-zagging and ill-judged intervention in Iraq came across as an incorrigible warrior people bent on dominance on the back of campaigns now in Islamic gar-ments. Iran did not create the power vacuum in the Middle East but is exploiting it to its own ad-vantage, until it started overreaching.

The distribution of energy resources and trade flows in the Gulf and wider Middle East is a central factor shaping both Iranian subregional strategies and the engagement patterns of external actors such as the European Union and Turkey. Iran's approach to the region leverages its geographic position and control over key energy corridors, enabling it to influence maritime navigation, ener-gy pricing, and bilateral economic dependencies. These economic levers are closely intertwined with security and diplomatic objectives, as Tehran uses trade relationships and energy linkages to reinforce political alliances, exert pressure on regional competitors, and secure strategic footholds in neighboring states, including Iraq and the Gulf littoral.

Simultaneously, the European Union and Turkey calibrate their engagement in response to these dynamics, balancing energy security, trade opportunities, and geopolitical interests. The EU's en-ergy diversification strategies, its investment in Iraqi infrastructure, and its advocacy for stable maritime trade routes reflect a broader concern with minimizing overreliance on any single actor, including Iran, while fostering multilateral cooperation. Turkey, with its

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historic trade, energy transit, and cultural connections to the region, pursues a dual strategy of economic integration and strategic influence, often aligning its engagement with both regional partners and global market considerations.

The interplay of energy distribution, trade flows, and regional strategy thus creates a complex web of interdependencies. Iranian subregional initiatives, including infrastructure investment, energy diplomacy, and participation in regional security forums, cannot be understood in isolation from the economic and strategic calculations of the EU and Turkey. Likewise, European and Turkish policies are continuously shaped by the need to navigate Iran's economic influence, secure access to energy resources, and contribute to regional stability without exacerbating existing tensions. In this context, energy and trade are not merely economic variables—they are instruments of power projection, diplomacy, and long-term strategic positioning.

In the post-HOPE environment, subregional schemes in the Persian Gulf have become increasing-ly important for understanding the strategic calculus of Iraq and the responses of external actors such as the European Union and Turkey. These schemes encompass a range of cooperative frame-works and informal alliances that focus on energy infrastructure, maritime security, trade corri-dors, and counterterrorism initiatives. Unlike HOPE, which was envisioned as a broad, multilat-eral platform, these subregional arrangements tend to be more flexible, pragmatic, and responsive to immediate security and economic needs.

For Iraq, participation in regional schemes such as LAS, OIC and the Union for the Mediterranean allows Baghdad to navigate its complex geopolitical environment, balancing relations with Iran, the Gulf States, and global powers. Through engagement in energy projects, cross-border infra-structure, and intelligence-sharing arrangements, Iraq can assert its sovereignty, attract foreign investment, and strengthen its strategic leverage, all while avoiding overdependence on any single external partner. These schemes also provide opportunities for Iraq to mediate between rival re-gional actors, positioning itself as a pivotal state in Gulf and Mesopotamian security architectures.

The European Union and Turkey respond to the relative loss of trading position and as lever ahead of ultimate stabilization of this sub-region once the madness is over in Teheran and a modicum of order restored in Club Med, by aligning their economic, diplomatic, and technical support with the objectives of stability, connectivity, and market access. For the EU, promoting trade agreements, development programs, and capacity-building initiatives allows Brussels to reinforce rules-based cooperation, enhance regional governance, and reduce the risk of external coercion undermining stability. Turkey, leveraging its historical and economic ties to Iraq and the Gulf, engages through energy, transport, and investment projects, seeking to integrate Baghdad into broader regional economic networks that complement Ankara's strategic ambitions. This serves both as a conduit to Asia that circumvents Euroasia and as a positioning for a more solid role in this region vital to the wheels of the world economy in recognition of the relative modernization and spendthrift Gulfis.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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It is always a good idea to play the ball, instead of the man, says my nephew and niece, who have an Iranian born mother. Nope, no foul play there, see nothing, hear nothing, Henning Jensen.

These post-HOPE subregional schemes therefore represent a layered architecture of cooperation: they serve as platforms for Iraq to assert autonomy, provide channels for external actors to ad-vance strategic and economic interests, and function as mechanisms for incremental trust-building in a historically volatile region. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how in-formal and formal regional frameworks interact, how external powers calibrate their engagement, and how Iraq navigates its multifaceted security, economic, and diplomatic environment.

Iran's foreign policy combines a regional security first orientation in the Persian Gulf with a broader Look East strategy toward Asia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In practice, this means Iran is less pivoted toward Europe and more toward Russia, China, and other non Western partners for trade, security support, and sanctions resilience. For the EU, this poses multiple engagement challenges. European diplomacy aims to sustain the JCPOA and promote regional stability, while Tehran increasingly frames relations in terms of resistance to Western pressure and alignment with Eastern powers.

In the Persian Gulf, Iran emphasizes control of the Strait of Hormuz, deterrence against U.S. and allied forces, and influence through local proxies. This orientation often runs counter to EU con-cerns about freedom of navigation, energy security, and regional stability. Iran's periodic threats to disrupt oil shipping through the Strait heighten European energy risk calculations and compli-cate strategic cooperation. However, there are niches for cooperation, such as de escalation frameworks or climate related Gulf initiatives, where EU interests could align with Iranian incen-tives to reduce tensions.

Iran's Look East policy, championed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, explicitly prioritizes Asian partners over the West, seeking access to larger markets, technological cooperation, and reduced Western influence. This decreases incentives for Tehran to center its foreign policy on the EU, especially given the bloc's alignment with U.S. sanctions and human rights pressures. As Iran deepens ties with China, Russia, SCO members, and BRICS, the strategic space for EU influence shrinks.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The EU's engagement agenda is also heavily shaped by normative considerations, particularly human rights and governance. Recent EU designations of the IRGC as a terrorist organization and renewed sanctions reflect frustration with Iranian repression and nuclear standoffs, but they also harden diplomatic channels. These moves exacerbate tensions and limit the EU's leverage, even as European institutions still nominally support dialogue and preservation of the JCPOA framework.

Iran's dual strategy has several crucial implications for EU policy. The EU faces dilemmas in bal-ancing security and engagement, seeking both to moderate Iran's regional posture, including re-duced proxy activity and restraint in the Gulf, and to restore structured diplomacy. Reviving the nuclear deal remains central to EU engagement, but progress is hindered by mutual distrust and broader geopolitical alignments. Iran's turn to Asia means the EU must find value added, for ex-ample in trade, cultural exchange, or climate cooperation, to differentiate itself from China and Russia if it wants to retain strategic relevance. Iran's policies also affect EU interests beyond Teh-ran, including in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Red Sea, requiring closer coordination with Gulf states and NATO partners to manage security spillovers.

Despite these challenges, there are areas where EU engagement could still make strategic sense. Climate, environmental, and water security cooperation involving Iran and Gulf neighbors offers a low politics platform for confidence building and regional risk reduction. People to people di-plomacy and education exchanges can build societal linkages that are less sensitive than hard geo-politics. Humanitarian and migration cooperation, given shared regional pressures, may create avenues for practical collaboration even when higher politics are stalled.

Iran's strategic orientation, security centric in the Persian Gulf and increasingly Eastward in glob-al alignments, reduces the centrality of the EU in Tehran's foreign calculations. This complicates European efforts to engage on nuclear diplomacy, human rights, and regional stability while main-taining normative leverage. At the same time, the EU's focus on multilateral agreements, human rights, and diversified cooperation provides some niche levers for constructive engagement, even as Iran deepens non-Western ties and resists Western pressure. Successful EU policy will likely require pragmatic prioritization of shared interests, de-escalation frameworks, and targeted coop-eration areas that can survive broader geopolitical tensions.

After all, dignity, prudence and expediency involves balancing ethics, wise judgement and practi-cal action, something different from falling back to being an incorrigible warrior people bend on regional dominance on the back of campaigns in Islamic garment. Dignity calls for respect and moral integrity. Prudence requires careful thought and foresight. Expediency focuses on practical and effective action. Together, they guide decisions in complex situations. They demand balancing principle with pragmatism. They ask us to weigh consequences before acting. They remind us that ethics and strategy can align. Ultimately, they shape wise, responsible, and effective choices. A choice for peace Iran is still to take. Or in the words of the erstwhile Rahbar of Iran "You can make peace with Iran, but not with the Islamic Republic.

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Iranian society is marked by deep cleavages across generation, geography, and ideology, with youth, comprising over half the population, demanding greater freedoms, economic opportunity, and political participation. These young, urban, and tech-savvy Iranians face high unemployment, social restrictions, and mandatory military service, fueling widespread disillusionment and protest. Alongside generational tensions, the center-periphery divide concentrates political and economic power in Tehran and the central provinces, while peripheral regions like Kurdistan, Sistan-Baluchistan, and Khuzestan face underdevelopment, repression, and marginalization. Governance in Iran is dominated by the Shia clergy, whose authority under velayat-e faqih gives the Supreme Leader and senior clerics control over key institutions, the judiciary, and state-run companies. Through bonyads and affiliated enterprises, the clergy exerts substantial economic influence, reinforcing ideological authority and shaping social programs. The bazaaris, traditional merchants historically allied with clerics, mediate between the state and communities, reinforcing social norms and providing both economic and political stability. Together, clergy-led economic networks and bazaar influence maintain loyalty, constrain reform, and sustain conservative social and religious values. These structures interact with governance, human rights, and rule-of-law challenges, as youth and peripheral populations often confront restrictions on expression, political participation, and access to justice. Social, economic, and political grievances intersect, producing recurring protests that highlight generational, geographic, and institutional tensions. In sum, Iran's societal landscape reflects the intertwining of clerical authority, economic control, youth activism, regional inequality, and contested governance, shaping both political stability and the potential for reform.

The EU is now looking forward to engage in dialogue in Baghdad on the conditions for resumption of diplomatic relations, once the disarmament of PMF has been completed, something Mansoureh Khamenei respects.

7. Iraq's Strategic Position and Foreign Policy Axes

In contemporary international relations, an axis represents a middle ground between alliance and coalition: a durable strategic alignment that allows states to coordinate behavior without binding legal commitments, thereby maximizing autonomy while enhancing collective leverage.

Iraq's Multi-Axial Balancing strategy

Iraq's foreign policy is best understood not as alignment within a single strategic camp, but as a multi-axial balancing strategy shaped by structural vulnerability, contested sovereignty, and regional power competition. Rather than pursuing alliance-based diplomacy, successive Iraqi gov-ernments have operated at the intersection of several overlapping foreign-policy axes, each acti-vated selectively according to issue area, domestic constraints, and external pressure. This pattern reflects neither incoherence nor indecision, but a rational response by a medium-weak state em-bedded in a highly polarized regional order.

The most deeply embedded of these axes is Iraq's relationship with Iran. Geographic contiguity, post-2003 political transformation, energy interdependence, religious networks, and the role of Iran-aligned armed actors have produced a dense web of security, economic,

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and political linkag-es. Cooperation against the Islamic State further institutionalized this axis, particularly in intelli-gence sharing and militia coordination. Yet the relationship remains structurally asymmetrical. Iran's ability to project influence within Iraqi institutions contrasts sharply with Baghdad's lim-ited capacity to shape Iranian behavior. Iraqi foreign policy within this axis is therefore defensive and regulatory, aimed at containing Iranian leverage within tolerable bounds while avoiding esca-lation that could destabilize the domestic political equilibrium.

Running in parallel is a conditional axis with the United States and Western partners, centered on counterterrorism, military training, financial connectivity, and diplomatic legitimacy. This axis provides Iraq with critical external support, including air capabilities, intelligence assistance, and access to international financial systems. However, it is politically constrained by domestic oppo-sition and by the risk of antagonizing Iran and its local allies. Consequently, Iraqi governments have deliberately framed this relationship as technical, time-bound, and sovereignty-respecting, resisting its evolution into a formal alliance. The result is a hedging strategy that extracts func-tional benefits while limiting political exposure.

A third axis has emerged through Iraq's gradual reintegration into the Arab regional system, par-ticularly via engagement with Gulf Cooperation Council states. This axis is primarily economic and diplomatic rather than security-driven. Electricity interconnections, investment initiatives, debt settlements, and high-level political normalization serve both practical and symbolic purpos-es. Strategically, this axis allows Baghdad to diversify its external partnerships, reduce overde-pendence on Iran, and reaffirm its Arab identity without endorsing explicitly anti-Iranian posi-tions.

Iraq's relationship with Turkey constitutes a fourth, highly transactional axis. Anchored in trade, water management, counter-PKK operations, and northern Iraq's political economy, this axis is marked by fragmentation and contested sovereignty. Ankara's practice of engaging simultaneous-ly with Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and local actors often undermines central-ized Iraqi authority. Iraqi foreign policy toward Turkey has thus been largely reactive, seeking to institutionalize cooperation while curbing unilateral Turkish actions on Iraqi territory

Figure Iraki Arabian Horses are known for their stamina, intelligence, refinement, purity, endur-ance and significance integral to Bedouin culture, warfare and trade

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Overlaying these bilateral and regional axes is a multilateral diplomatic axis centered on the Unit-ed Nations, the Arab League, and other international and regional organizations. Through this channel, Iraq compensates for limited hard power by leveraging institutional legitimacy and con-vening capacity. Baghdad's hosting of regional dialogues, including between rival Middle Eastern powers, reflects an effort to recast Iraq from a site of proxy competition into a platform for man-aged engagement.

Taken together, these axes reveal a foreign policy logic defined by issue-specific alignment, asymmetry, and risk minimization. Iraq's central strategic objective is not regional leadership or ideological projection, but state preservation and internal stabilization. Successive governments have therefore prioritized axis management—preventing any single external alignment from be-coming dominant, while extracting security assistance, economic relief, and diplomatic space from multiple partners.

Analytically, Iraq illustrates the foreign-policy behavior of a fragile but adaptive state operating within a contested regional order. Its effectiveness depends less on choosing between competing axes than on sustaining equilibrium among them. Where external alignments harden into domestic fault lines, Iraqi sovereignty erodes; where they are balanced and instrumentalized, alignment be-comes leverage. In this sense, Iraq's foreign policy transforms vulnerability into strategy and ge-ography from constraint into connective tissue.

Table

Axis	Primary Partner	Nature of alignment	Domains of Engagement	Level of Asymmetry	Startegic Purpose	Key Challenges
Iran Axis	Iran	Dense, asymmetrical, defensive	Security (militia coordination, counterterrorism), energy, political influence	High (Iran exerts strong leverage)	Contain Iranian influence, stabilize internal politics, access energy and security support	Risk of domestic backlash, over-dependence, potential Iranian overreach
US–Western Axis	United States, EU, UK	Conditional, hedging, technical	Security (airpower, intelligence), financial connectivity, diplomatic legitimacy	Moderate (Baghdad controls participation but sensitive domestically)	Extract security and technical support, maintain sovereignty, counter terrorism	Domestic opposition, balancing Iran, avoiding perception of subordination
Arab Gulf Axis	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait	Economic-diplomatic, reintegration-oriented	Investment, trade, electricity, debt resolution, political normalization	Moderate (mutual benefit but Iraq is recovering influence)	Diversify partnerships, reduce Iranian dependence, signal Arab belonging	Historical mistrust, regional rivalries, implementation gaps

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Turkey Axis	Turkey	Transactional, issue-specific, reactive	Trade, water, counter-PKK operations, northern Iraq politics	High (Turkey can act unilaterally)	Institutionalize cooperation while limiting interference	Sovereignty concerns, fragmented engagement, competing regional interests
Multilateral Axis	UN, Arab League, OIC, regional forums	Legitimacy- and convening-oriented	Diplomacy, conflict mediation, multilateral dialogues	Low (Iraq uses forums instrumentally)	Gain legitimacy, mediate regional disputes, host dialogues	Limited enforcement power, reliance on external actors, maintaining neutrality

Implications

Iraq's strategic positioning across multiple axes presents both opportunities and constraints for the European Union, and these dynamics cannot be understood in isolation from its neighboring states in the Levant and the Levantine periphery. Iraq's foreign policy is highly issue-specific and asymmetrical, requiring the EU to engage through multiple channels rather than relying on a sin-gle alignment, such as with the United States or Iran, to shape outcomes. Engagement must there-fore be simultaneous and calibrated across political, economic, and security domains, reflecting Iraq's hedging behavior and its attempts to preserve sovereignty in a complex regional order. EU influence through security cooperation alone is limited, as Iraq's primary security alignments are with the United States and Iran, while other regional partners—including Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria—create additional layers of interdependence and potential leverage.

Iraq's hosting of multilateral dialogues and regional mediation initiatives provides the EU with opportunities to exercise indirect influence, particularly by supporting conflict-resolution mecha-nisms and fostering regional dialogue. The EU's normative and institutional credibility, including its expertise in governance, rule of law, human rights, and economic reform, aligns with Iraq's broader desire for international legitimacy. Its gradual reintegration into the Arab regional system, particularly through engagement with Gulf Cooperation Council states, suggests that the EU can leverage economic partnerships to complement Gulf and Turkish engagement. Joint investments, infrastructure development, energy transition initiatives, and technology cooperation can position the EU as a reliable, neutral partner that strengthens Iraq's long-term resilience without destabiliz-ing existing axes of alignment.

Neighboring states further shape the calculus. Jordan, which shares a border with Iraq and has his-torically maintained a careful balance between Western and regional interests, can serve as a lo-gistical and political conduit for EU engagement, particularly in trade, energy, and cross-border security coordination. Lebanon's fragile political system and economic vulnerabilities present both challenges and opportunities for EU influence: while Beirut is constrained by internal divi-sions and external pressures, coordinated EU initiatives in governance, economic reform, and civil society can indirectly strengthen Iraq's regional environment by supporting stability and institu-tional resilience. Syria, with its ongoing

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conflict and complex relationship with both Iran and Tur-key, underscores the strategic environment in which Iraq operates. EU engagement in Iraq must account for spillover effects from Syria, including refugee flows, cross-border security concerns, and the role of external actors such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey in shaping regional dynamics (Phillips, 2016; Lister, 2020).

The EU has a range of policy options for exercising influence in this environment. Structured dia-logues with Iraq across all its axes—including Iran-aligned actors, Gulf partners, Turkey, and neighboring Levant states—can facilitate comprehensive engagement. The EU can serve as a neu-tral convener in Iraq-hosted regional forums while promoting normative convergence in govern-ance, transparency, and institutional reform. Economic and development partnerships offer further avenues for influence, allowing the EU to support infrastructure investment, energy transition, and digital capacity-building, targeting sectors where EU expertise provides unique value, including renewable energy, urban planning, education, and healthcare. Supporting Iraqi institutions in rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and administrative reform provides technical expertise and le-gitimacy-enhancing visibility, while fostering civil society, think tanks, and academic exchanges builds long-term social and political networks aligned with EU norms.

Security and stability support can also play a role, provided it is carefully calibrated to avoid an-tagonizing Iran-aligned actors or exacerbating tensions with neighboring states. Advisory support, training, intelligence-sharing, and participation in regional counterterrorism or maritime security initiatives offer avenues for engagement without compromising neutrality, while peacebuilding and early-warning programs can reduce the likelihood of axis-driven conflicts escalating. Recog-nizing Iraq's multi-axial balancing as an opportunity to position the EU as a flexible, non-coercive actor is crucial. The EU can offer platforms for dialogue between Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and all regional powers, reinforcing sovereignty while embedding European norms and practices in multilateral processes.

Key considerations for the EU include avoiding axis favoritism, prioritizing long-term influence over short-term gains, leveraging soft power and normative credibility where Iraq and its neigh-bors seek legitimacy, and integrating regional awareness to account for domestic divisions, exter-nal pressures, and historical sensitivities. Iraq's multi-axial foreign policy, in concert with the complex dynamics of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, provides the EU with a strategic opportunity to exert influence indirectly, but only through a nuanced, multi-domain, and patient approach. By combining economic partnership, governance support, and facilitation of regional dialogues, the EU can strengthen Iraq's sovereignty and resilience while embedding European norms and values, all without destabilizing existing regional balances.

Baghdad's engagement with Club MED

Baghdad's engagement with the Mediterranean reflects a deliberate strategy to diversify Iraq's external partnerships and reduce dependence on its immediate neighbors, particularly Iran and Turkey. While Iraq is not a Mediterranean state geographically, it recognizes the strategic im-portance of the region as a conduit for energy exports, economic integration, and diplomatic en-gagement. One of the most tangible levers of this engagement is energy

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infrastructure, especial-ly pipelines linking Iraq to the Levant and the broader Mediterranean. These pipelines, whether operational or planned, provide Iraq with alternative export routes for crude oil and gas, circum-venting chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz or regions dominated by Iranian influence. Through these energy corridors, Baghdad gains bargaining power vis-à-vis traditional partners and enhances its ability to project economic influence regionally, signaling both autonomy and relia-bility to external investors. Energy diplomacy thus functions as both a practical and symbolic in-strument of Iraq's Mediterranean engagement.

Beyond infrastructure, Iraq has pursued institutional and multilateral linkages with Mediterra-nean frameworks, most notably the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and various EU en-gagement mechanisms. Iraq's participation in UfM-related dialogues, observer activities, and co-operative initiatives allows it to integrate into Euro-Mediterranean political and economic spaces despite not being a member per se. These linkages create multiple leverage points: technical and normative support for governance and economic reform, access to European financial instruments, and platforms for dialogue with Mediterranean states, including both Gulf and Levant actors ac-tive in the region. By situating itself within these institutional architectures, Baghdad signals will-ingness to align with international norms, attract investment, and cultivate a perception of Iraq as a bridge between the Arab heartland, the Mediterranean, and the European Union. EU-Iraq linkag-es, reinforced through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the UfM, and bilateral co-operation agreements, thus intersect with Iraq's Mediterranean engagement, offering Baghdad avenues for external support that bypass traditional axis dependencies while embedding EU influ-ence.

Iraq's perception of the Caucasus region further illustrates its broader Mediterranean strategy. While Iraq is geographically removed, the Caucasus represents both an alternative energy corridor and a geopolitical balancing instrument. The development of pipelines through Georgia, Azerbai-jan, and Turkey offers additional diversification of energy exports, enabling Iraq to mitigate re-gional chokepoints and hedge against coercion from proximate powers. Additionally, these con-nections enhance Iraq's diplomatic reach into a broader Eurasian space, allowing Baghdad to par-ticipate indirectly in regional energy politics and multilateral security dialogues. From Baghdad's perspective, the Caucasus is not only an economic corridor but also a space to cultivate relation-ships with smaller, strategically located states that can amplify Iraq's leverage vis-à-vis major powers, including Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

The overlap with EU interests in both the Mediterranean and Caucasus is significant. The EU prioritizes diversification of energy sources, stability in transit countries, and integration of Medi-terranean economies into broader European markets. Iraq's pipelines, institutional engagement with the UfM, and connections to the Caucasus complement these EU priorities, creating a natural convergence of interests. For the EU, Iraq functions as a potential partner in regional energy security, infrastructure projects, and normative governance initiatives, while for Baghdad, the EU provides legitimacy, technical expertise, and financial instruments that strengthen its Mediter-ranean strategy. In this sense, Iraq's Mediterranean engagement, its Caucasus considera-tions, and EU linkage efforts are mutually reinforcing: pipelines provide tangible economic leverage, insti-tutional participation signals political alignment and international legitimacy, and EU support amplifies Baghdad's ability to balance its multiple axes of regional engagement.

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However, these levers are not purely technical. They carry symbolic weight, signaling Iraq's aspi-ration to diversify its foreign policy, mitigate over-dependence on proximate regional powers, and position itself as a connector between the Arab core, the Mediterranean, and the EU. The Mediter-ranean thus represents for Baghdad both an external outlet and a normative arena, where eco-nomic, diplomatic, and political objectives converge. The EU's engagement, when carefully aligned with Iraq's Mediterranean strategy, can enhance Baghdad's autonomy, reinforce multilat-eralism, and embed European norms in an environment traditionally dominated by regional rival-ries.

Table

Iraq' Axis / Regional Lever	Primary Partners Region	Nature of Engagement	Levers /Tools	EU Engagement Opportunities	Constraintd /Risk
Iran Axis	Iran	Dense, asymmetrical, security and political influence	Militia coordination, energy interdependence, political alignment	Indirect diplomatic engagement, support for governance reform, multilateral platforms	High domestic sensitivity, risk of EU perceived bias, Iranian leverage inside Iraq
US–Western Axis	US, UK, EU	Conditional, technical, hedging	Security cooperation, intelligence sharing, financial connectivity	Joint training, counterterrorism assistance, rule-of-law programs	Domestic political opposition, balancing Iran, potential overreliance on EU-Western coordination
Gulf Axis	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait	Economic-diplomatic reintegration	Trade, investment, electricity interconnection	Infrastructure investment, economic partnerships, renewable energy cooperation	Historical mistrust, overlapping Gulf influence, risk of undermining Iran balance
Turkey Axis	Turkey	Transactional, reactive, issue-specific	Trade, water management, northern Iraq politics	Advisory support, technical assistance, trade facilitation	Sovereignty concerns, fragmented engagement, unilateral Turkish initiatives
Multilateral Axis	UN, Arab League, OIC, regional forums	Legitimacy and mediation	Hosting dialogues, conflict resolution, normative signaling	EU participation in multilateral dialogues, support for peacebuilding and early-warning mechanisms	Limited enforcement power, reliance on Iraqi neutrality, regional tensions

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Mediterranean Engagement	UfM, EU, Levant	Economic and institutional integration	Pipelines, trade corridors, observer participation in UfM, energy cooperation	Support for pipelines, infrastructure investment, capacity building, trade facilitation, institutional linkages	Perception of siding with EU-Western axis, infrastructure delays, regional instability
Caucasus / Eurasian Outreach	Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey	Alternative energy and diplomatic corridor	Energy pipelines, trade connectivity, diplomatic ties	Support for energy diversification, technical advisory, multilateral engagement in transit states	Geopolitical tensions (Russia, Turkey), infrastructural and political constraints, long-term investment horizon

The cross-tab analysis reveals a significant degree of overlap among Iraq's foreign policy axes and its Mediterranean and Caucasus levers, indicating that engagement in these regions comple-ments Baghdad's broader multi-axial balancing strategy. Mediterranean and Caucasus initiatives are not isolated policy choices but are integrated into Iraq's effort to diversify economic and dip-lomatic linkages, mitigate dependence on proximate powers, and enhance its regional autonomy. Within this context, European Union engagement has the potential to reinforce multiple levers simultaneously. Support for pipelines, infrastructure projects, governance capacity-building, and normative initiatives can strengthen Iraq's strategic flexibility while advancing core EU priorities, including energy diversification, economic integration, and institutional reform. At the same time, these opportunities are tempered by the need for careful calibration. Favoring one axis over anoth-er or neglecting domestic political sensitivities risks undermining Iraq's delicate equilibrium and may compromise the effectiveness of EU initiatives. By prioritizing multilateral platforms, tech-nical cooperation, and institutionally grounded interventions, the EU can exercise influence indi-rectly, leveraging Iraq's own diplomatic and economic strategies without overstepping or destabi-lizing existing regional balances. This approach underscores the importance of patience, adapta-bility, and nuanced engagement in pursuing European foreign policy objectives in the Iraqi and wider Levantine context.

Iraq occupies a unique and pivotal position in the Middle East, situated at the intersection of mul-tiple regional and international power axes. Its geography, resources, and historical experience have made it both a bridge and a buffer between Iran, the Gulf states, Turkey, and the wider Le-vant. Consequently, Iraq's foreign policy operates along several interlinked dimensions, encom-passing relations with neighboring states, alignment with global actors, and the management of internal diversity. These dimensions are shaped by the imperative to maintain sovereignty and strategic autonomy, particularly in a context where external powers—including Iran, the United States, and regional Gulf actors—exert strong influence.

For Iraq, integration into a strictly Iranian-led regional bloc is neither desirable nor feasible. While Iran maintains significant influence, especially in the south through political, religious,

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and militia networks, Iraq's long-term stability and capacity for autonomous engagement with the Gulf require that it remain independent, free, and sovereign. Only through such independence can Iraq serve as a credible interlocutor for Gulf countries and broader regional partners, balancing competing interests while safeguarding its own national priorities.

Now, that Turkey has begun to reconcile with Turkey pragmatically, it is difficult to predict what comes next. Baghdad's relationship with India and Egypt are truly unique and of a certain stature and season. If you truly want to ingratiate yourself with Baghdad you need to engage and mediate those two powers and stimulate their links with Baghdad at the center.

The Cairo-Baghdad-Delhi Axis

Baghdad's relations with both India and Egypt reflect long-standing historical linkages that have evolved through shifting regional and global contexts. Iraq's engagement with Egypt is rooted in the broader Arab political and ideological framework, particularly during the era of pan-Arab na-tionalism in the mid-twentieth century. From the 1950s onward, Egypt and Iraq shared both a cul-tural and political affinity, characterized by mutual participation in Arab League initiatives, shared support for anti-colonial movements, and collaboration on regional security and economic development. The ideological alignment was particularly evident in Iraq's engagement with Egyp-tian-led initiatives during the Nasser period, including efforts to foster Arab unity and to coordi-nate foreign policy positions in response to Western influence in the region. This relationship, however, has historically oscillated in intensity according to internal political changes in Baghdad and Cairo, regional conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli wars, and broader shifts in global power alignments. In the post-2003 era, the Iraq-Egypt relationship has focused more on pragmatic eco-nomic and diplomatic engagement, including investment, trade, and reconstruction assistance, while retaining a symbolic dimension rooted in shared Arab identity and historical solidarity.

Iraq's relationship with India, by contrast, is shaped less by ideological affinity and more by pragmatic economic and strategic considerations. Historical ties between the Mesopotamian re-gion and the Indian subcontinent predate modern statehood, facilitated by trade routes connecting the Persian Gulf with the Indian Ocean. In the twentieth century, India and Iraq developed rela-tions grounded in non-aligned diplomacy, energy cooperation, and trade. Iraq has consistently viewed India as a reliable partner in energy imports, technical expertise, and infrastructure devel-opment. The relationship was tested during periods of sanctions and geopolitical isolation, notably during the 1990s, but has since expanded in scope, encompassing energy, defense, information technology, and cultural exchange. In recent years, Baghdad has actively sought to deepen ties with India as part of a broader strategy of diversifying its foreign partnerships, reducing de-pendency on proximate powers, and strengthening relationships with globally significant states outside the immediate Middle Eastern theatre. India's capacity to engage as a neutral, economical-ly oriented partner aligns with Iraq's hedging strategy, providing Baghdad with both a source of technical assistance and an additional diplomatic buffer within a complex regional order.

Table

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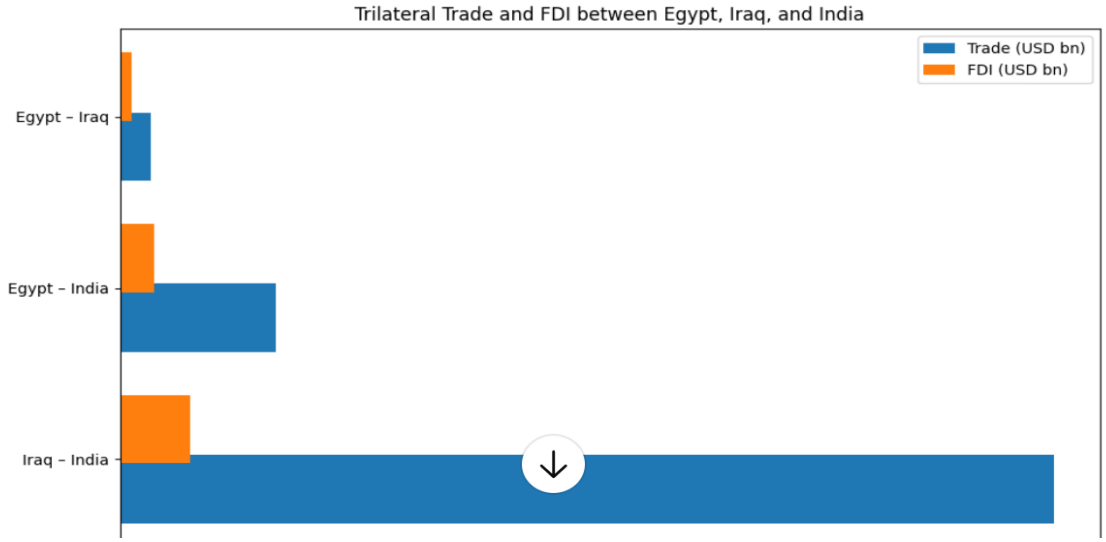

The Iraq–India axis dominates trilateral economic engagement, accounting for approximately 33.3 bn USD in trade plus 2.5 bn USD in FDI, or roughly 84.8% of the combined total of 42.1 bn USD. This predominance reflects Iraq's role as a major energy exporter to India and the strategic investments Indian firms have made in Iraq's infrastructure and energy sectors, consoli-dating a high-volume, mutually dependent economic link.

By comparison, Egypt–India trade totals around 5.56 bn USD, with an additional 1.2 bn USD in FDI, yielding 6.76 bn USD combined, or approximately 16.1% of the trilateral total. This engagement is smaller in scale but strategically significant, encompassing Egyptian exports of textiles and chemicals and Indian machinery and technology exports to Egypt, alongside targeted investments in infrastructure and energy projects.

Egypt–Iraq represents the smallest axis, with 1.1 bn USD in trade and 0.4 bn USD in FDI, yielding 1.5 bn USD combined, equivalent to 3.6% of the total trilateral economic engage-ment. While geographically proximate and historically intertwined through shared Arab identity and cultural ties, economic integration remains modest, constrained by infrastructure bottlenecks, regulatory differences, and historical patterns of bilateral trade that have favoured oil- and energy-related corridors with external partners. Despite its smaller size, the Egypt–Iraq link has outsized political and strategic importance within the broader inter-Arab order. Iraq can serve as a bridge between the Gulf and the Levant, while Egypt provides regional diplomatic leverage and access to Mediterranean markets. Strengthening this axis would therefore not only enhance trade but also reinforce intra-Arab con-nectivity, stability, and economic resilience, offering a counterweight to reliance on non-Arab partners.

The European Union can play a catalytic role in cooperation with Jordan in stimulating Egypt–Iraq trade and investment by leveraging its multi-bilateral strategy: it can incentivise infrastruc-ture projects, harmonise regulatory frameworks, and facilitate industrial and technology partner-ships. Targeted EU-backed financial instruments and trade facilitation schemes—for example, supporting logistics corridors, customs modernisation, or SME export promotion—could expand bilateral trade flows beyond the current 1.5 bn USD level. By integrating this approach within the EU's broader Gulf and regional strategy, Brussels can simultaneously enhance regional econom-ic integration and strengthen its normative and

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economic leverage, turning a small but strate-gically important Egypt–Iraq axis into a more robust channel of inter-Arab cooperation.

Both relationships illustrate the evolution of Iraq's foreign policy from ideologically influenced alignments toward pragmatic, multi-axial engagement. Egypt represents continuity in cultural and Arab-political networks, while India exemplifies strategic diversification and global engagement beyond the Middle Eastern core. From a European Union perspective, these historical linkages suggest potential avenues for multilateral engagement, wherein EU initiatives could leverage Iraq's established relationships to foster broader regional connectivity, promote economic part-nerships, and support infrastructure and governance projects that intersect with Indian and Egyp-tian cooperation. Recognizing the historical depth and contemporary pragmatism of Baghdad's relationships with both states allows external actors to calibrate policy initiatives in ways that complement Iraq's hedging strategies while reinforcing European interests in stability, energy security, and regional integration.

Baghdad's relationships with India and Egypt reflect both historical continuity and evolving stra-tegic pragmatism, shaped by regional politics, global alignments, and economic imperatives. Iraq's engagement with Egypt is historically rooted in the broader Arab political and ideological framework, particularly during the era of pan-Arab nationalism in the mid-twentieth century. From the 1950s onward, Iraq and Egypt shared cultural and political affinities, participating ac-tively in Arab League initiatives and supporting anti-colonial movements across the region. Dur-ing the Nasser era, Baghdad's alignment with Cairo was characterized by efforts to coordinate foreign policy, advance Arab unity, and present a unified stance against Western interventions in the Middle East. This relationship, however, fluctuated in intensity according to domestic political transformations in both states, regional conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli wars, and shifts in the broader international system. In the post-2003 period, Iraq-Egypt relations have evolved toward pragmatic economic and diplomatic engagement. Trade, investment, and reconstruction assistance have become the primary instruments of bilateral interaction, although symbolic and normative dimensions rooted in shared Arab identity continue to inform diplomatic discourse.

In contrast, Iraq's relationship with India has been shaped predominantly by pragmatic economic and strategic considerations rather than ideological affinity. The historical connectivity of Meso-potamia to the Indian subcontinent, through maritime and overland trade routes, laid the founda-tion for sustained interaction, which was formalized in the twentieth century through non-aligned diplomacy, energy cooperation, and commercial exchange. India has consistently been perceived by Baghdad as a reliable partner in energy imports, technical assistance, and infrastructure devel-opment. This relationship was constrained during the 1990s sanctions regime but has since ex-panded, encompassing energy, defense, information technology, and cultural exchange. In recent years, Baghdad has actively sought to deepen ties with India to diversify its foreign partnerships and mitigate over-reliance on regional powers such as Iran and Turkey. India's role as a neutral and economically-oriented actor aligns with Iraq's multi-axial hedging strategy, providing both diplomatic leverage and access to technical expertise outside the immediate Middle Eastern thea-tre.

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Energy diplomacy remains a central dimension in Iraq's engagement with both India and Egypt, and it is increasingly framed through multilateral mechanisms such as the Paris Energy Man-agement (PEM) Convention, which Iraq has used as a platform to coordinate with international partners on energy efficiency, renewable development, and cross-border infrastructure projects. The PEM Convention provides Iraq with normative and technical support, facilitating energy poli-cy harmonization with partners in the Mediterranean, South Asia, and the broader European sphere. For Baghdad, participation in PEM initiatives complements its pipeline and infrastructure strategy, linking domestic energy security objectives to international standards while creating ad-ditional avenues for European engagement. Egypt, as a regional energy hub and Mediterranean interlocutor, and India, as a major energy consumer and technology partner, both intersect with Iraq's PEM-aligned initiatives, allowing Baghdad to leverage multilateral platforms to strengthen trade, investment, and technical cooperation.

From a European Union perspective, Iraq's historical and contemporary relationships with India and Egypt offer multiple entry points for policy engagement. The EU can leverage Baghdad's es-tablished connections to foster regional connectivity, support infrastructure and energy projects, and reinforce normative governance frameworks. By aligning EU initiatives with PEM-convention objectives, European actors can promote energy security, sustainability, and technical standards while complementing Iraq's hedging strategy and multi-axial diplomacy. Moreover, the conver-gence of Iraq's Mediterranean, Gulf, and global partnerships suggests that EU engagement should be calibrated across multiple levers—energy, trade, governance, and multilateral cooperation—rather than narrowly focused on one axis, thereby maximizing influence while respecting Iraq's strategic autonomy.

In sum, Iraq's engagement with Egypt and India illustrates the evolution of its foreign policy from ideologically framed alignment to pragmatic, multi-axial diplomacy. Egypt represents enduring cultural and Arab-political continuity, while India exemplifies strategic diversification and global outreach. Both relationships, reinforced by Iraq's participation in initiatives such as the PEM Convention, provide tangible and symbolic levers that enhance Baghdad's autonomy, facilitate regional integration, and create opportunities for EU engagement. Recognizing the interplay of historical affinity, pragmatic strategy, and multilateral frameworks is essential for understanding Iraq's external relations and for designing effective, calibrated European foreign policy approach-es in the Middle Eastern and broader Eurasian context.

Table

Axis / Lever	Primary Partners / Region	Nature of Engagement	Key Levers / Tools	EU Engagement Opportunities	Constraints / Risks
Iran Axis	Iran	Dense, asymmetrical, security and political influence	Militia coordination, energy interdependence, political alignment	Indirect diplomatic engagement, support for governance and rule of law, multilateral platforms	High domestic sensitivity, risk of EU perceived bias, Iranian leverage within Iraqi institutions

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US–Western Axis	US, UK, EU	Conditional, technical, hedging	Security cooperation, intelligence sharing, financial connectivity	Joint training, counterterrorism assistance, financial and governance programs	Domestic political opposition, balancing Iran, risk of overreliance on Western partners
Gulf Axis	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait	Economic-diplomatic reintegration	Trade, investment, electricity interconnection	Infrastructure investment, renewable energy, economic partnerships	Historical mistrust, overlapping Gulf influence, potential conflict with Iran axis
Turkey Axis	Turkey	Transactional, reactive, issue-specific	Trade, water management, northern Iraq politics	Advisory support, technical assistance, trade facilitation	Sovereignty concerns, fragmented engagement, unilateral Turkish initiatives
Multilateral Axis	UN, Arab League, OIC, regional forums	Legitimacy and mediation	Hosting dialogues, conflict resolution, normative signaling	EU participation in multilateral dialogues, support for peacebuilding and early-warning mechanisms	Limited enforcement power, reliance on Iraqi neutrality, regional tensions
Mediterranean Engagement	UfM, Levant, Egypt	Economic and institutional integration	Pipelines, trade corridors, observer participation in UfM, energy cooperation	Support for pipelines, infrastructure investment, capacity building, trade facilitation, institutional linkages	Perception of favoritism, infrastructure delays, regional instability
Caucasus / Eurasian Outreach	Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey	Alternative energy and diplomatic corridor	Energy pipelines, trade connectivity, diplomatic ties	Energy diversification projects, technical advisory, multilateral engagement in transit states	Geopolitical tensions (Russia, Turkey), infrastructural and political constraints, long-term investment horizon
Bilateral Engagement – Egypt	Egypt	Historical Arab political alignment, economic-diplomatic engagement	Trade, investment, reconstruction assistance, cultural and normative linkages	Infrastructure and reconstruction support, economic partnerships, governance	Regional instability, political oscillations, balancing with Gulf and Iran axes

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				collaboration	
Bilateral Engagement – India	India	Strategic diversification, pragmatic economic and technical engagement	Energy cooperation, infrastructure development, technical expertise, IT and defense collaboration	EU-India-Iraq trilateral projects, energy and infrastructure partnerships, capacity-building support	Distance and geopolitical scope, competition with other partners, dependency on multi-lateral coordination
PEM Convention Leverage	Multilateral energy framework (Mediterranean, South Asia, Europe)	Energy governance, standards, cross-border cooperation	Energy policy harmonization, renewable energy projects, technical and normative assistance	Support for sustainable energy infrastructure, normative alignment, technical assistance, multilateral energy integration	Implementation challenges, dependency on Iraqi institutional capacity, geopolitical sensitivities

Analytical Summary:

This cross-tab illustrates the complex, multi-dimensional nature of Iraq's foreign policy. Iraq balances multiple axes simultaneously, using both regional and global levers to diversify part-nerships and enhance autonomy. Mediterranean and Caucasus engagement, alongside bilateral relations with India and Egypt and participation in the PEM Convention, provide complementary tools that extend beyond proximate regional dependencies. The European Union can engage across these levers through infrastructure investment, normative governance programs, capacity-building, multilateral cooperation, and energy-sector partnerships. At the same time, engagement requires careful calibration to avoid perceived favoritism, respect domestic sensitivities, and align with Iraq's broader multi-axial strategy.

Encouraging Iraq to formally participate in the Paris Energy Management (PEM) Convention and to engage more actively with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) requires a strategic approach that combines political incentives, technical support, and alignment with Baghdad's broader foreign-policy objectives. First, it is essential to recognize that Iraq's foreign policy is multi-axial and carefully calibrated to balance competing regional and global relationships. Any approach must therefore respect Iraq's sensitivities toward proximate powers, including Iran and Turkey, while highlighting the domestic and regional benefits of participation in multilateral frameworks. For Baghdad, engagement with the PEM Convention and the UfM is not merely pro-cedural; it signals sovereignty, legitimacy, and an avenue to diversify partnerships beyond the Gulf and Iran-centric axes.

The EU and its partners can proceed by framing participation as a strategically advantageous, low-risk pathway to achieve tangible national objectives. In the case of the PEM Convention, this involves emphasizing Iraq's access to technical expertise, energy efficiency standards, renewable energy technologies, and funding instruments that can directly support domestic reconstruction and energy-sector modernization. Demonstrating concrete benefits, such as assistance with energy policy harmonization, capacity-building programs for Iraqi

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institutions, and access to internation-al renewable energy finance, strengthens the cost-benefit calculus in favor of formal adoption. Additionally, the EU can offer tailored technical cooperation and knowledge-sharing missions, involving Iraqi energy authorities in pilot programs that illustrate the practical value of PEM-aligned standards, while simultaneously embedding European norms and standards in Iraq's ener-gy governance framework.

For the UfM, the strategy must combine diplomatic engagement with practical project-based incentives. Baghdad's observer status and limited participation to date can be expanded by creat-ing concrete collaboration opportunities in sectors where Iraq's interests converge with UfM ob-jectives, such as renewable energy interconnections, infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and cross-border cooperation with Mediterranean states. The EU can act as a mediator and facili-tator, helping Iraq integrate its pipelines, trade corridors, and energy initiatives into broader Medi-terranean frameworks. This approach reinforces Baghdad's sovereignty while providing regional visibility and recognition, which are politically valuable in the domestic arena and among Arab neighbors.

A phased and multi-layered approach may be most effective. Initial steps could focus on technical committees, pilot projects, and observer-level engagements, allowing Iraq to gain confidence and demonstrate tangible outcomes without committing to full membership immediately. Subse-quent stages could involve formal accession to the PEM Convention, integration into UfM project pipelines, and participation in joint multilateral initiatives. At each stage, clear EU signaling and diplomatic backing are necessary to underscore the benefits of cooperation, particularly the rein-forcement of Iraq's economic autonomy, energy security, and normative alignment with interna-tional best practices.

Simultaneously, messaging should frame these initiatives as complementary to Iraq's multi-axial strategy rather than as an alignment with a single axis. This requires careful coordination with Baghdad to ensure that enhanced engagement does not antagonize Iran, Turkey, or Gulf partners, thereby preserving Iraq's hedging flexibility. In practice, this could involve trilateral or quadrilat-eral platforms that include the EU, Iraq, and other regional actors, providing multilateral legitima-cy and distributing the perceived benefits and responsibilities of engagement.

In sum, fostering Iraqi participation in the PEM Convention and deeper UfM engagement requires a combination of technical demonstration, tangible project-based incentives, phased accession processes, and careful diplomatic coordination. By framing participation as a tool to enhance Iraq's sovereignty, economic resilience, and regional integration, the EU and its partners can cre-ate a compelling rationale for Baghdad to embrace multilateral energy governance and Mediterra-nean cooperation, thereby strengthening long-term European influence in the region.

Domestic constraints on Iraki foreign policy

Domestic constraints in the Kissingerian sense refer to the internal political, social, economic, and institutional factors that limit a state's ability to conduct autonomous or unconstrained for-eign policy. In this framework, foreign policy is not determined solely by external threats, strate-gic opportunities, or geopolitical imperatives; it is also shaped by the internal

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distribution of pow-er, the stability and capacity of institutions, public opinion, economic resources, and elite consen-sus. A state may have formal sovereignty and internationally recognized authority, but domestic constraints can restrict the range of feasible foreign policy options, force compromises, or compel alignment with external actors to preserve regime stability or political legitimacy.

In practical terms, these constraints manifest in several interrelated dimensions. First, institu-tional capacity—including the bureaucratic expertise, coherence, and coordination among for-eign, defense, and economic ministries—affects a state's ability to formulate and implement for-eign policy. Weak or fragmented institutions can lead to inconsistent messaging, policy delays, or vulnerability to external manipulation. Second, political legitimacy and public opinion shape leaders' foreign policy choices, especially in states where domestic constituencies are politically mobilized or where elite competition is intense. Leaders may avoid policies that could provoke internal opposition, even if strategically advantageous externally. Third, economic and resource constraints—such as reliance on external aid, dependence on specific export revenues, or fiscal limitations—can limit a state's strategic autonomy and incentivize alignment with external pow-ers. Fourth, social and sectarian dynamics influence foreign policy by creating domestic cleav-ages that external actors can exploit or that constrain leaders' operational freedom, particularly in multi-ethnic or multi-sectarian states.

The interplay of these factors creates a situation in which foreign policy outcomes are often the product of negotiation between external imperatives and internal pressures. For example, Iraq's foreign policy demonstrates how domestic constraints—including sectarian balance, political fragmentation, and economic dependence on oil revenues—limit the government's ability to fully align with a single regional axis or to pursue independent multilateral strategies without first cali-brating domestic consensus. Similarly, Jordan's foreign policy reflects domestic constraints in its careful balancing between maintaining stability among Palestinian populations, integrating refu-gee inflows, and navigating pressures from Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf. In both cases, internal politi-cal and economic realities shape the timing, scope, and intensity of external engagement, illustrat-ing the Kissingerian principle that a state's foreign policy is always constrained by the impera-tives of internal survival and legitimacy.

Understanding domestic constraints in this sense allows external actors, including the European Union, to design engagement strategies that align with internal incentives, accommodate political sensitivities, and leverage domestic capacities. It also explains why some states may adopt hedg-ing strategies, balancing multiple external partners while preserving flexibility, rather than pursu-ing singular or aggressive foreign policy agendas. Ultimately, domestic constraints do not merely limit foreign policy; they structure the strategic environment in which leaders operate, define fea-sible options, and influence both the timing and effectiveness of international initiatives.

Table

Domestic Constraint	Nature / Impact on Iraq's Foreign Policy	Effect on Room for Maneuver	EU Levers to Expand Room for Maneuver	Expected Outcomes / Sensitivity to EU Concerns

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Political Fragmentation	Iraq's government is divided along sectarian and party lines; executive-legislative coordination is limited. Decision-making is often slow and contingent on internal consensus.	Limits ability to pursue independent foreign policy, particularly with Iran, Gulf states, or Mediterranean initiatives. Hedging becomes necessary.	Support governance reform, facilitate inclusive political dialogue platforms, provide advisory assistance in coalition-building, and strengthen parliamentary diplomacy.	Stronger institutional coherence allows Baghdad to negotiate foreign policy initiatives with EU input, increasing alignment with EU priorities in energy, trade, and regional stability.
Elite Competition / Patronage Networks	Political elites maintain control through patronage, clientelism, and informal networks; foreign policy decisions can reflect internal bargaining rather than strategic logic.	Constrains coherent and long-term foreign policy planning; increases risk of policy reversals and axis-based favoritism.	Provide technical assistance for transparent policy planning, support anti-corruption initiatives, and promote norm-building through PEM and UfM participation.	Reduces influence of sectarian or factional pressures, enabling Iraq to adopt multilateral strategies compatible with EU goals, such as Mediterranean integration and energy diversification.
Sectarian and Social Cleavages	Sunni-Shia-Kurd divides, regional affiliations, and civil society pressures shape domestic politics; public opinion can constrain foreign alignment.	Limits ability to openly cooperate with certain external actors (e.g., US vs Iran) and reduces room for independent regional policy.	Facilitate civil society exchanges, educational and cultural programs, and media partnerships; support social cohesion projects and inclusive dialogue platforms.	Strengthens domestic legitimacy of foreign policy decisions, increasing Iraq's willingness to engage in EU-backed multilateral frameworks and regional cooperation initiatives.
Economic Dependence / Resource Vulnerability	Heavy reliance on oil revenues and external aid; vulnerability to sanctions or market fluctuations constrains bargaining power.	Reduces flexibility in energy policy, trade partnerships, and multilateral commitments.	Support energy sector reform via PEM Convention, investment in diversified infrastructure, technical expertise in renewable energy, and access to EU development finance.	Economic stability enables Iraq to pursue diversified foreign partnerships and reduces dependence on single axes, increasing receptivity to EU strategic initiatives.
Institutional Weakness / Bureaucratic Capacity	Ministries and state institutions often lack coherent planning, technical expertise, or inter-agency coordination.	Reduces operational capacity for foreign policy execution, delays participation in multilateral frameworks, and limits leverage in Mediterranean or Caucasus initiatives.	Provide targeted training, capacity-building programs, advisory missions, and EU-Iraq institutional twinning (e.g., in foreign affairs, energy, trade).	Strengthened bureaucratic capacity allows Iraq to implement EU-aligned projects (pipelines, PEM, UfM programs) more effectively, enhancing responsiveness to European objectives.
Security Dependence /	Reliance on US military support,	Restricts independent	Support EU-led multilateral	Reduces external coercion, allowing

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Regional Pressures	Iranian influence via militias, and proximity to unstable borders.	foreign policy, particularly regarding military cooperation, regional mediation, and multilateral engagement.	security dialogues, advisory and peacebuilding programs, and non-coercive stabilization projects; integrate Iraq into regional security forums with EU facilitation.	Iraq greater latitude to engage with EU initiatives, pursue Mediterranean energy projects, and integrate into multilateral governance mechanisms.
External Perceptions and Legitimacy Needs	Iraq seeks recognition as sovereign and stable; domestic legitimacy often tied to visible success in foreign engagement and reconstruction.	Constrains willingness to take policy risks or diverge from traditional axes.	Provide platforms for high-visibility EU-supported multilateral engagement (e.g., UfM, PEM initiatives, regional trade fairs), public diplomacy, and recognition of Iraq's initiatives.	Enhances Iraq's domestic and regional legitimacy, making participation in EU-linked initiatives politically feasible and attractive.

Analytical Summary:

This cross-tab demonstrates that Iraq's domestic constraints—political fragmentation, sectari-an cleavages, elite competition, economic dependence, institutional weakness, and security vulnerabilities—systematically limit its foreign policy autonomy. Each constraint reduces Baghdad's ability to pursue independent strategies or align fully with EU objectives.

The EU can expand Iraq's room for maneuver by combining technical, economic, and normative instruments: governance support, capacity-building, infrastructure investment, energy sector re-form via PEM, multilateral integration through the UfM, and civil society programs. These measures simultaneously strengthen domestic institutions, mitigate internal and external pres-sures, and increase Iraq's ability to participate in multilateral regional frameworks.

By systematically addressing domestic constraints, the EU can make Iraq more sensitive and re-sponsive to European concerns, particularly in areas of energy diversification, Mediterranean integration, regional stability, and normative alignment. This strategy converts domestic vulnera-bilities into opportunities for long-term engagement and creates the conditions for Iraq to act as a more autonomous and constructive actor in the Middle East, while maintaining its necessary mul-ti-axial balance.

Unemployment in Irak

Iraq continues to contend with a persistent unemployment problem, which exerts profound effects on economic stability, social cohesion, and long-term development prospects. Estimates suggest that unemployment affects a substantial portion of the population, yet significant disparities exist across regions, age groups, and gender. The Kurdistan Region in the north demonstrates consider-able variability between governorates, reflecting both

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structural and administrative differences, whereas central and southern provinces show more consistent but equally concerning rates of la-bor underutilization. The roots of this structural problem are multi-dimensional, encompassing economic, political, and social factors, and require an integrated policy response that addresses both labor market inefficiencies and institutional governance gaps.

The overreliance on public sector employment is a central factor shaping Iraq's labor market. Government jobs function as a social safety net, yet this dependence limits private sector devel-opment, suppresses entrepreneurial activity, and constrains the expansion of sustainable enterpris-es. Compounding this issue is Iraq's economic dependence on oil revenues, which restricts diver-sification into labor-intensive sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, technology, and renewa-ble energy. Such mono-sector dependency not only limits employment opportunities but also ex-poses the economy to external shocks and inhibits long-term resilience.

A pronounced skills mismatch further exacerbates unemployment, as the education and vocational training systems are insufficiently aligned with labor market requirements. Young people entering the workforce often lack the technical and professional competencies demanded by employers, particularly in emerging sectors. Regional disparities also contribute to unequal employment out-comes. Differences in infrastructure, investment levels, and administrative capacity across gover-norates create uneven access to economic opportunities, leaving certain provinces marginalized despite national development initiatives.

Addressing these challenges necessitates a multifaceted policy approach. Economic diversifica-tion should be prioritized, emphasizing the development of non-oil sectors and the promotion of entrepreneurship and small and medium enterprises. Labor market reform must ensure that educa-tion and training programs are aligned with labor market demand, emphasizing digital literacy, technical skills, and entrepreneurial competencies. Strategic regional development initiatives are needed to target underdeveloped provinces, improve infrastructure, and foster local economic growth, thereby reducing disparities between regions.

Figure

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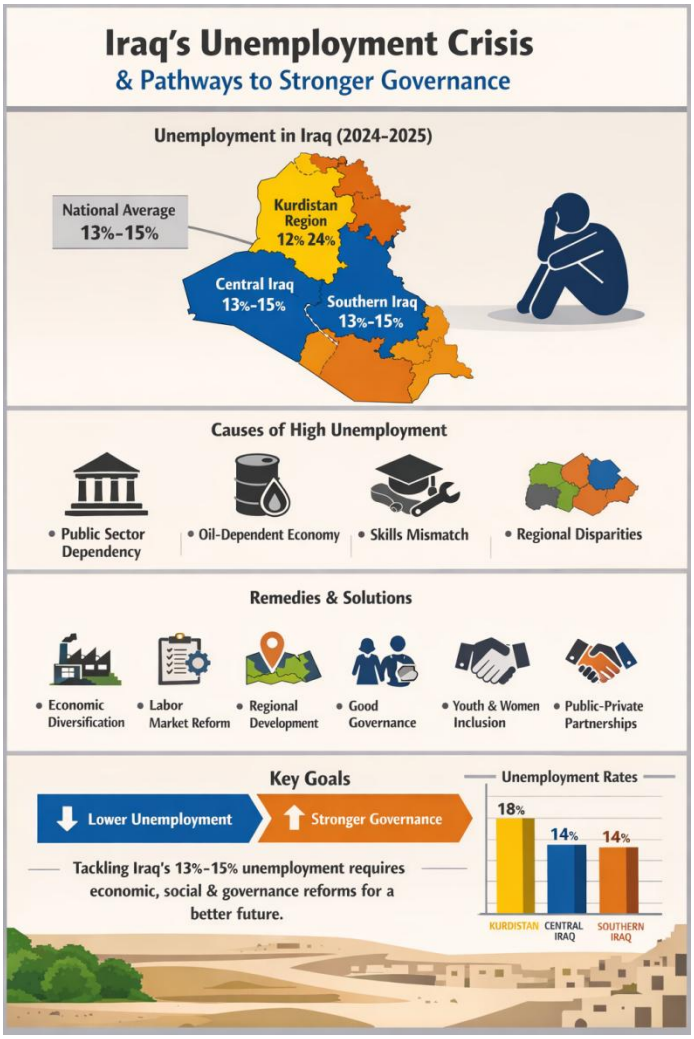

Institutional strengthening and governance reform are equally crucial. Enhancing transparency, streamlining regulatory frameworks, and combating corruption can create a favorable environ-ment for private sector expansion and increase public confidence in government institutions. Poli-cies that foster youth and gender inclusion are essential to expand participation in the labor mar-ket and enhance social equity. Finally, public-private partnerships, particularly those involving international partners, can generate employment opportunities, facilitate knowledge transfer, and support broader economic development objectives.

The overarching policy objectives include reducing unemployment through targeted economic reforms, skill development, and equitable regional investment. Strengthening governance through institutional capacity-building and transparent administration is vital for sustainable growth. In-clusive development that expands opportunities for youth and women is essential to mitigate so-cio-economic inequalities and promote social stability. The international dimension is critical for Iraq, as external actors provide financial resources, technical expertise, policy guidance, and political support to complement domestic reforms.

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The European Union engages Iraq through multiple mechanisms, including strategic partnerships, development cooperation programs, and technical assistance. EU initiatives often focus on economic diversification, governance reform, and youth and women's inclusion. By funding voca-tional training programs, supporting small and medium enterprises, and facilitating public-private partnerships, the EU can help enhance labor market outcomes while promoting transparency, regulatory capacity, and institutional resilience. The EU also promotes normative frameworks that encourage accountability and equitable regional development, aligning economic interventions with broader social and governance objectives.

The United States has historically influenced Iraq's economic and institutional landscape through development aid, security assistance, and investment facilitation. US-led programs often aim to strengthen private sector capacity, foster entrepreneurship, and support infrastructure develop-ment. In the context of unemployment, American engagement can encourage innovation-driven sectors and facilitate knowledge transfer, particularly in technology, logistics, and energy sectors. Coordination with Iraqi authorities allows US interventions to complement domestic policy objec-tives while advancing governance and institutional reform.

International financial institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, provide critical macroeconomic guidance, funding for development projects, and technical expertise for labor market and fiscal reforms. IFIs can help Iraq design targeted employment pro-grams, support inclusive growth initiatives, and implement reforms that improve transparency and financial management. Conditional lending and policy advice from these institutions incentivize Iraq to adopt structural reforms that promote economic diversification and resilience while miti-gating regional disparities.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, particularly countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, exerts influence through investment, trade, and bilateral cooperation. GCC countries can provide capital inflows for industrial zones, infrastructure projects, and entrepre-neurship programs. Regional partnerships may also create employment opportunities through cross-border investments and shared economic initiatives. Additionally, GCC engagement can complement governance and institutional reforms by supporting administrative capacity-building, promoting private sector-led growth, and facilitating labor market integration in line with regional economic corridors.

Youth unemployment in southern Iraq is particularly acute as a result of intersecting structural, institutional, and socio-economic factors that have accumulated since 2003 and intensified in the post-ISIS period. The region's heavy dependence on the oil sector has generated limited employ-ment spillovers, while weak diversification into agriculture, manufacturing, and services has con-strained labor absorption for a rapidly growing youth population. Public-sector employment, long used as a mechanism for social pacification, has reached saturation and remains governed by pat-ronage networks rather than meritocratic recruitment, excluding large segments of educated but politically unconnected youth. At the same time, deficiencies in the education and vocational training systems have produced a persistent mismatch between skills supply and labor-market demand, further exacerbating structural unemployment.

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These economic constraints are reinforced by governance failures at the provincial and municipal levels, including corruption, uneven service delivery, and limited capacity to implement local de-velopment strategies. Environmental stressors—such as water scarcity, salinization, and pollution in the Basra and Dhi Qar governorates—have undermined traditional livelihoods, particularly in agriculture and fisheries, accelerating rural-to-urban migration and intensifying competition for scarce urban jobs. The resulting combination of economic marginalization, social frustration, and perceived injustice has generated widespread grievances among southern Iraqi youth, as reflected in recurrent protest movements since 2015 and, most notably, during the 2019 Tishreen protests.

In this context, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have emerged as an alternative pathway to economic security and social inclusion. PMF recruitment benefits from the provision of relatively stable income, access to informal welfare and protection networks, and a sense of identity, status, and belonging that is often absent from civilian labor markets. For many unemployed or under-employed young men, particularly in peripheral urban areas, PMF affiliation functions as a substi-tute labor market embedded within broader systems of political loyalty and social control. This dynamic not only facilitates the entrenchment of armed actors within local communities but also blurs the boundary between formal state institutions and non-state power structures. Over time, the absorption of unemployed youth into PMF structures risks reinforcing cycles of militarization, dependency, and fragmented sovereignty, undermining efforts at state consolida-tion, civilian governance reform, and economic diversification. As long as unemployment remains structurally unresolved in southern Iraq, PMF recruitment will continue to be driven less by ideol-ogy than by economic necessity, turning labor-market failure into a persistent security challenge with long-term implications for Iraq's political stability and regional security environment.

Addressing youth unemployment in southern Iraq requires a shift from short-term public hiring toward a coordinated employment and economic diversification strategy anchored at the provin-cial level. Priority should be given to labor-intensive sectors with high absorption potential, in-cluding agro-processing, construction, logistics, maintenance services, and environmental rehabil-itation. Targeted public works programs linked to water management, land reclamation, and urban infrastructure can provide immediate employment while addressing environmental degradation. These programs should be implemented through transparent, locally managed mechanisms to re-duce patronage and rebuild trust between youth and public institutions.

Expanding vocational education and technical training, aligned with actual market demand, is es-sential to correcting the skills mismatch affecting southern Iraqi youth. Partnerships between technical institutes, local firms, and international donors can support apprenticeship schemes that combine income with skills acquisition. Small and medium-sized enterprise development should be incentivized through access to microfinance, credit guarantees, and simplified licensing proce-dures. Special economic zones and industrial clusters near ports and transport corridors in Basra could generate employment beyond the oil sector. Strengthening municipal governance capacity is critical to ensure that development funds trans-late into tangible job creation rather than rent distribution. Anti-corruption safeguards and digital monitoring tools should be embedded in all employment programs to limit elite capture. Youth-focused social protection mechanisms, including unemployment assistance

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tied to training partic-ipation, can reduce the economic pressure to join armed groups. Civilian alternatives to PMF re-cruitment must be made financially competitive, particularly for first-time labor-market entrants.

Demobilization and reintegration mechanisms should link disengagement from armed groups to guaranteed access to civilian employment and training. Community-based employment initiatives can help reintegrate at-risk youth while reducing local acceptance of militia dominance. Private-sector engagement should be supported through risk-sharing instruments and political-risk insur-ance to encourage hiring in fragile environments. Women's labor-force participation should be expanded through targeted training, childcare support, and safe-workplace initiatives. Youth participation in local planning processes can improve program relevance and reduce feel-ings of political exclusion. International partners should align employment interventions with broader governance and security sector reforms to avoid reinforcing parallel power structures. Sustained donor engagement is necessary to move beyond pilot projects and achieve labor-market scale. Ultimately, reducing youth unemployment in southern Iraq is not only an economic impera-tive but a core security intervention essential to weakening militia recruitment and strengthening state legitimacy.

Taken together, these external actors offer both direct and indirect levers of influence. They can augment domestic capacity, provide funding and technical assistance, and create incentives for governance reforms that address the structural causes of unemployment. Effective engagement requires Iraq to balance the priorities of multiple partners, align external interventions with na-tional development strategies, and ensure that economic opportunities are distributed equitably across regions and social groups. Coordination among these actors enhances the potential for sus-tainable impact while reducing the risks of overlapping initiatives or policy fragmentation.

Strategic Dynamics and Cooperation in the Gulf and Iraq's Role

China's growing presence in the Gulf is structured around multiple, mutually reinforcing building blocks that extend beyond prestige to tangible influence and power projection. Economically, China integrates itself into regional infrastructure, trade, and energy networks, particularly through Belt and Road Initiative projects, port investments, and long-term energy contracts. These engagements create dependencies and leverage, embedding China in the operational and strategic fabric of the Gulf. Technologically and financially, China exports telecommunications systems, digital infrastructure, and financial services that increase its visibility and influence while shaping regional norms. Diplomatically and culturally, Beijing cultivates prestige through state visits, multilateral forums, and soft power initiatives, reinforcing legitimacy while enabling practical influence in regional negotiations. Securing energy supplies remains central: long-term contracts and investments in energy corridors reduce China's market exposure and provide strategic foot-holds, translating economic integration into bargaining power. Collectively, these building blocks illustrate that China's Gulf engagement is a blend of prestige and practical power, with real impli-cations for regional sub-systems, energy flows, and multilateral dynamics.

Energy trade forms a foundational pillar of the Gulf's political economy and a key domain where EU engagement intersects with these dynamics. The EU's "Strategic Partnership with

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the Gulf" seeks to combine trade, investment, and energy cooperation with broader objectives of regional stability and security. Energy flows are not only economic assets but instruments of influence; shifts in production, pricing, or access carry geopolitical weight. Several assumptions frame this approach: global politics remains power-driven, where resources are instrumentalized; the EU and Gulf together account for roughly 20 percent of global GDP; and the current multi-bilateral EU–GCC policy architecture is fragmented, limiting operational effectiveness. Despite these structural challenges, the EU can strengthen energy security, support Gulf economic diversification, and provide a platform for political dialogue, situating energy trade at the intersection of economic and strategic priorities.

Iraq occupies a unique and pivotal position in the Middle East, situated at the intersection of mul-tiple regional and international power axes. Its geography, resources, and historical experience make it both a bridge and a buffer between Iran, the Gulf states, Turkey, and the wider Levant. Consequently, Iraq's foreign policy operates along several interlinked dimensions, encompassing relations with neighboring states, alignment with global actors, and the management of internal diversity. Integration into a strictly Iranian-led regional bloc is neither desirable nor feasible for Baghdad. While Iran wields significant influence, particularly in southern regions through politi-cal networks and militia channels, Iraq's long-term stability and capacity for autonomous en-gagement with the Gulf require that it remain independent, free, and sovereign. Only through such independence can Iraq serve as a credible interlocutor for Gulf countries and broader regional partners, balancing competing interests while safeguarding its own national priorities.

Three constants shape Iraq's internal and external policy imperatives. First, its territorial borders, though internationally recognized, remain sensitive, particularly in peripheral regions where state authority has historically been weaker. Border integrity is central to Iraqi sovereignty and affects its defense posture and cross-border relations with neighbors such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Ara-bia. Second, the Kurdish population in the north represents both a source of political pluralism and a challenge to centralized authority. The Kurdish Regional Government exercises substantial au-tonomy, including in security and economic relations, requiring Baghdad to calibrate its diploma-cy to accommodate Kurdish interests while maintaining national cohesion. Third, the loyalty of the southern Arab population, largely concentrated in Shiite-majority areas, has been shaped by historical experiences, sectarian identity, and the legacy of external interventions. This loyalty provides Baghdad with internal stability but also constitutes a conduit through which Iran has ex-erted influence, underscoring the delicate balancing act Iraq must maintain to avoid overdepend-ence on any single regional power.

Iran's subregional strategies intersect directly with China's economic penetration and EU–Gulf engagement, creating overlapping spheres of influence that Iraq must navigate carefully. Iraq's sovereignty, internal diversity, and strategic positioning allow it to act as both a bridge and a buff-er, facilitating Gulf engagement while resisting subordination to any one external actor. The com-bination of borders, Kurdish autonomy, and southern Arab loyalties reinforces Iraq's need to maintain a balanced foreign policy that is independent, resilient, and capable of leveraging its strategic geography and internal pluralism.

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Addressing security concerns in EU–Gulf relations requires a similarly multifaceted approach. Diplomatic engagement, intelligence sharing, counterterrorism collaboration, and maritime secu-rity coordination are all essential, and joint military exercises strengthen operational coordination. Promoting arms control and non-proliferation helps prevent escalation of tensions, while cyberse-curity and hybrid threat management address emerging vulnerabilities. Preparedness for humani-tarian crises, whether natural or conflict-driven, further underscores the importance of coordinated regional responses. Supporting conflict prevention initiatives and encouraging economic diversi-fication and sustainable development enhance long-term stability, while sustained engagement, trust-building, and a long-term strategic perspective remain indispensable.

Enhancing regional cooperation extends beyond security to economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Trade agreements, investment facilitation, joint ventures, and technology transfer create interdependence that reinforces stability and mutual prosperity. Cultural and educational exchanges foster people-to-people connections, deepen mutual understanding, and promote col-laboration in academia and research. Environmental sustainability, including joint action on cli-mate change and water scarcity, alongside shared best practices, forms another pillar of coopera-tion. Health and pandemic preparedness, encompassing research collaboration, infrastructure de-velopment, and coordinated response mechanisms, ensures readiness for future crises. Continuous political dialogue and conflict resolution initiatives maintain open channels for negotiation and advance preventive strategies. The first EU–GCC Summit in mid-October 2024 provided an op-portunity for stock-taking, reaffirming the importance of these multidimensional approaches in promoting stability, security, economic growth, and regional resilience.

Formal and informal foreign policy dialogue complement these structural and operational frame-works. Formal mechanisms, such as treaties and multilateral agreements, provide legal legitima-cy, transparency, and stability, while informal interactions offer flexibility, rapid responsiveness, and trust-building opportunities. For Iraq, balancing these approaches is crucial: formal arrange-ments anchor its sovereignty and economic partnerships, while informal channels allow rapid co-ordination in response to crises and facilitate nuanced engagement with Iran, Gulf states, and ex-ternal actors like China. Integrating formal and informal mechanisms ensures that Iraq, alongside the EU and Gulf partners, can navigate overlapping spheres of influence while protecting strategic autonomy and fostering stability.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate the interwoven nature of Gulf politics and strategic en-gagement. China leverages infrastructure, technology, and energy to build both prestige and prac-tical influence; the EU seeks to strengthen energy and trade cooperation while promoting stability and strategic dialogue; Iran projects subregional power; and Iraq, together with regional actors such as Turkey, navigates these intersecting currents to maintain sovereignty, internal cohesion, and balanced external relations. Integrating energy trade, security cooperation, and sub-system analysis provides a coherent framework for understanding opportunities, constraints, and policy levers, highlighting where strategic engagement can most effectively advance stability, economic development, and security in the Gulf region.

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Building on this analysis, strategic recommendations for the EU, Iraq, and Gulf partners include deepening energy and trade partnerships, coordinating investments in infrastructure and technolo-gy, sustaining diplomatic engagement, and promoting multilateral dialogue to manage overlap-ping spheres of influence. Security cooperation should remain multidimensional, combining intel-ligence sharing, counterterrorism initiatives, maritime security, cybersecurity, and crisis prepar-edness. Integrating economic, environmental, health, and cultural dimensions into the partnership reinforces trust, mutual understanding, and long-term strategic alignment. By pursuing these measures, Iraq can maintain independence and sovereignty, the EU can exert stabilizing influence, and Gulf states can engage in a balanced regional architecture that mitigates external domination while promoting shared prosperity and security.

8.0 IRAQ'S THREE STRATEGIC CONSTANTS

Several internal constants shape Iraq's foreign policy and reinforce this need for autonomy. First, the territorial borders of Iraq, though internationally recognized, remain sensitive and occasional-ly contested, particularly in peripheral regions where the state's authority is historically weaker. Maintaining border integrity is a central concern of Iraqi sovereignty, influencing its defense pos-ture and cross-border relations with neighbours such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Second, the Kurdish population in the north represents both a source of political pluralism and a challenge to centralized authority. The Kurdish Regional Government enjoys significant autonomy, includ-ing in security and foreign economic relations, necessitating that Baghdad calibrate its diplomacy to accommodate Kurdish interests while preserving national cohesion. Third, the loyalty of the southern Arab population, which largely aligns with Shiite-majority areas, has been shaped by historical ties, sectarian identity, and the legacy of external interventions. This loyalty provides Baghdad with internal stability in the south but also creates channels through which Iran has exer-cised influence, underscoring the delicate balancing act Iraq must maintain to avoid being sub-sumed into a single external bloc.

Collectively, these constants—the border, the Kurds, and the southern Arab loyalties—define the structural constraints and strategic opportunities for Iraq's foreign policy. They reinforce the country's imperative to assert sovereignty, maintain internal cohesion, and cultivate balanced ex-ternal relations. By navigating these factors carefully, Iraq can remain an independent actor capa-ble of engaging with the Gulf states on energy, trade, and security issues while avoiding overreli-ance on any single regional power. This positioning is crucial not only for Iraq's own stability but also for the broader architecture of Gulf and Middle Eastern diplomacy, as it allows the country to function as a bridge and mediator between competing regional interests.

Iraq's complex socio-political landscape is shaped by several enduring constants: the Kurds, the borders, and the loyalty of the southern Arabs. The Kurds, a significant ethnic group, have long sought autonomy and recognition, navigating a history marked by conflict and resilience. The borders of Iraq, drawn in the aftermath of World War I, continue to influence regional dynamics and internal divisions. Meanwhile, the loyalty of the southern Arabs, particularly in the context of Iraq's Shia majority, plays a crucial role in the nation's political

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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stability and identity. Together, these elements form the backbone of Iraq's ongoing narrative, reflecting both its challenges and its enduring spirit.

Iraq's foreign policy and regional position are anchored in three enduring internal constants: its territorial borders, the Kurdish autonomous region in the north, and the political loyalties of the southern Arab population. Each of these dimensions constrains and enables Baghdad's strategic choices, shaping both domestic cohesion and external engagement.

Borders: Iraq's internationally recognized boundaries provide the framework for sovereignty but are inherently sensitive. Peripheral regions, particularly along the Iranian, Turkish, and Saudi frontiers, have historically experienced weaker state control, exposing Iraq to cross-border influ-ence, smuggling, and security challenges. The integrity of these borders remains central to Iraq's ability to assert autonomy, negotiate from strength with neighboring powers, and maintain credi-bility with Gulf partners. Border management is thus not simply a domestic issue but a key factor in shaping Iraq's regional posture and capacity to resist alignment with any single external bloc.

The Kurds: The Kurdish population in northern Iraq represents both a source of political plural-ism and a structural constraint on centralized authority. The Kurdistan Regional Government ex-ercises extensive autonomy, controlling security forces, energy resources, and international eco-nomic relations. This autonomy provides the central government with both opportunities and chal-lenges: it allows Baghdad to benefit from Kurdish economic and diplomatic networks, but it also requires careful balancing to ensure national cohesion. Kurdish influence underscores the need for flexible and nuanced policy-making, as any attempt to ignore or marginalize Kurdish authority risks internal instability and weakens Iraq's negotiating position externally. Southern Arab Loyalties: The southern Arab population, concentrated in Shiite-majority prov-inces, has historically been loyal to Baghdad yet simultaneously influenced by Iranian political, religious, and militia networks. This duality provides both stability and potential vulnerability. Loyalty from the south reinforces Iraq's internal governance and secures control over critical oil-producing regions, which are essential for both domestic revenue and international engagement. At the same time, the proximity of Iranian influence channels pressure into Baghdad's foreign policy, necessitating a careful balancing act to maintain sovereignty while managing external ex-pectations.

Collectively, these constants create structural boundaries within which Iraq must operate. They define the limits of central authority, shape the country's capacity to negotiate with external ac-tors, and determine its strategic flexibility. Understanding these constants is essential to assessing Iraq's role in the Gulf and Middle East, its potential as an independent actor, and the conditions under which it can engage with both the EU and Gulf partners without being subsumed into a sin-gle external bloc.

We will now examine those in more depth.

8.1 The Kurds

The Kurds are one of the oldest indigenous peoples of the Middle East, with a presence in the re-gion stretching back thousands of years, long before the emergence of modern state borders. His-torically concentrated in the mountainous regions spanning northern Iraq,

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southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, and parts of Syria, Kurdish communities have maintained distinct linguistic, cultural, and social traditions that have been remarkably resilient over centuries. Despite this long historical continuity, the Kurds have often found themselves divided by the artificial boundaries imposed by colonial-era agreements and later by the formation of nation-states.

Throughout their history, Kurdish aspirations have centered on recognition, autonomy, and the preservation of their cultural identity. In Iraq, these aspirations have crystallized into demands for self-administration within the Kurdistan Region, including control over local governance, security forces, and natural resources. Kurds have also sought broader regional influence through political representation and strategic alliances, balancing the pursuit of autonomy with the realities of state sovereignty and regional geopolitics. Their enduring presence, combined with strong communal bonds and historical memory, makes Kurdish communities a pivotal factor in the social, political, and security dynamics along both the Iraqi and Syrian borders. The Kurds in Iraq are a significant ethnic group, primarily residing in the northern region known as Iraqi Kurdistan. This area includes the provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, which are governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Kurds have a rich cultural heritage and speak various dialects of the Kurdish language, including Sorani and Kurmanji. Historically, the Kurds have faced numerous challenges in their quest for autonomy and recognition. After World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres initially promised them independence, but this was later overturned by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Despite these setbacks, the Kurds have maintained a distinct identity and have been at the forefront of political movements within Iraq.

In 1991, following the Gulf War, a no-fly zone was established over Kurdish areas to protect them from Saddam Hussein's regime, leading to de facto autonomy for the region. Since then, the KRG has developed its own government institutions and military forces, known as the Peshmerga. The Kurds have also played a crucial role in the fight against ISIS, gaining international recognition for their efforts. However, they continue to face internal and external political challenges, including disputes over territory and resources with the central Iraqi government.

Addressing the Kurdish issue within Iraq is a complex and multifaceted challenge that involves various international and regional stakeholders. Here's a breakdown of the positions and interests of key players, as well as an evaluation of Iraq's federal constitution and potential remedies:

International and Regional Stakeholders

United States

The U.S. has historically supported the Kurds, particularly during the fight against ISIS. However, its broader strategy in the Middle East has shifted towards containing Iran and ensuring regional stability. The U.S. aims to balance its support for Kurdish autonomy with maintaining a unified Iraq. Most of its oil investments are in Iraki Kurdistan.

Israel

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Israel views the Kurds as a strategic ally in the region, partly due to shared concerns about Iranian influence. Israel has provided covert support to Kurdish groups, seeing them as a counterbalance to hostile neighbours. They tend to cooperate with Turkey on PKK, and its security establishment was not convinced about the wisdom of toppling Sadaam Hussein, the oil thief from Tikrit.

European Union

The EU has engaged with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) primarily through humanitarian aid and development cooperation. The EU supports a stable and federal Iraq, recognizing the KRI as a federal region under the 2005 Iraqi constitution.

Turkey

Turkey's policy towards the Kurds is complex. While it has economic ties with the KRI, it opposes Kurdish independence due to concerns about its own Kurdish population and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Turkey prefers a strong central Iraqi government that can control Kurdish aspirations. This is the priority of the current Turkish government.

Iran

Iran opposes Kurdish independence and seeks to maintain Iraq as a unified state under its influence. Iran supports Shia militias in Iraq and has significant political and military influence in the country. There are some Kurdish terrorist groups it regularly fights against and wants the EU to ban and has coordinated with Turkey to prevent a declaration of independence, and is now rather pleased with the level of influence and cooperation it has with Baghdad following a decade of civil war and Sunni insurgency, as the majority took over the reign contrary to what is the norm in the Arab world.

Iraqi Central Government

The central government in Baghdad aims to maintain national unity and control over the country's resources. It has a contentious relationship with the KRI, particularly over oil revenues and territorial disputes.

Figure 7 – Kurdish man with moustache

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Evaluation of Iraq's Federal Constitution and System

The 2005 Iraqi constitution recognizes the Kurdistan Region as a federal entity with its own parliament and security forces. However, the implementation of federalism has been inconsistent, leading to disputes over resource sharing and territorial control.

Proposed Iraqi-Owned Remedies

1. Strengthening Federalism: Ensuring the full implementation of the federal constitution, including equitable resource sharing and clear delineation of powers between Baghdad and Erbil.
2. Dialogue and Negotiation: Facilitating continuous dialogue between the central government and Kurdish leaders to address grievances and build trust.
3. Economic Integration: Promoting economic cooperation and development projects that benefit both the KRI and the rest of Iraq, reducing economic disparities.
4. Security Cooperation: Establishing joint security mechanisms to manage disputed territories and combat common threats like ISIS.
5. International Mediation: Seeking the support of international organizations and allies to mediate disputes and provide frameworks for conflict resolution.

Addressing the Kurdish issue requires a balanced approach that respects the rights and aspirations of the Kurds while maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity and stability.

8.2 The bilateral border regime

Paul Collins' Mountains and Lowlands: Ancient Iran and Mesopotamia offers a sweeping and in-tricate portrait of the entangled destinies of two foundational civilizations. Spanning from 6000 BCE to AD 650, his study reveals how the fertile lowlands of Mesopotamia—modern-day Iraq—and the rugged highlands of Iran were bound together in a dynamic interplay of exchange, rivalry, and mutual transformation. The evolution of agriculture, urbanization, writing systems, organized religion, and warfare was not the product of isolated innovation, but of sustained interaction across ecological and cultural frontiers.

The lowlands, with their alluvial abundance, nurtured the earliest cities and bureaucratic states. In contrast, the highlands offered mineral wealth, strategic elevation, and a different rhythm of social organization. This asymmetry fostered both dependence and competition. Mesopotamian polities often relied on highland resources and protection, while Iranian groups sought access to the sur-plus and connectivity of the lowlands. The result was a geopolitical dialectic—cooperation punc-tuated by conflict—that shaped the contours of empire and identity across millennia. Collins' work underscores that Iraq's contemporary geopolitical orientation cannot be understood without reference to this deep historical entanglement. The tensions and synergies between mountain and plain continue to echo in Iraq's internal divisions and external alignments.

The twin civilizations of ancient Iran and Mesopotamia achieved extraordinary feats in political organization, technological innovation, and strategic vision. Mesopotamia gave birth to the world's first cities, such as Eridu and Uruk, laying the groundwork for urban governance and state formation. It pioneered writing through cuneiform and codified law

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with the Code of Hammurabi, establishing the template for legal order. Technological breakthroughs such as the wheel and the chariot revolutionized mobility and military logistics. In astronomy and mathematics, Mesopota-mians introduced the sexagesimal system, the 60-minute hour, and the 360-degree circle—concepts that remain embedded in modern scientific thought.

Ancient Iran, particularly under the Achaemenid Empire founded by Cyrus the Great, expanded the scale and sophistication of imperial governance. Stretching across vast territories from Egypt to the Indus Valley, the Persians developed a decentralized administrative system using satraps and the Royal Road to maintain cohesion and facilitate trade. Their policy of cultural tolerance allowed diverse populations to retain their customs, fostering a durable imperial identity. Militari-ly, they innovated with elite units such as the Immortals and strategic use of cavalry, setting standards for organized warfare.

These historical precedents offer enduring lessons for the present. Ancient trade routes between Mesopotamia and Iran illustrate the benefits of economic integration and cooperative infrastruc-ture. The exchange of technologies, religious ideas, and artistic motifs affirms the value of cross-cultural dialogue in building resilient societies. Strategic alliances forged through diplomacy and intermarriage underscore the importance of partnership in navigating geopolitical complexity. Moreover, the ancient emphasis on resource stewardship and sustainable agriculture provides a blueprint for contemporary environmental governance.

In the modern era, the Iran-Iraq border regime remains deeply entangled with the broader Turkey-Iran relationship. The territorial disputes that culminated in the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 and the Border Delimitation Commission of 1914 were shaped by imperial ambitions and tribal allegiances. The Shatt al-Arab waterway, where the Tigris and Euphrates converge, was a focal point of contention due to its strategic value for trade and navigation. The Khuzestan region, rich in oil and ethnically diverse, attracted competing claims. Kurdish territories straddling the frontier were contested for their strategic depth and tribal networks. Western Iran, adjacent to Ottoman domains, became a theater of shifting loyalties and tactical maneuvering.

These disputes were codified through a series of legal instruments. The Treaty of Erzurum in 1847 laid the groundwork for border demarcation. The Constantinople Protocol of 1913 and the Tehran Protocol of 1911 reaffirmed these boundaries, while the Border Delimitation Commission of 1914 undertook the technical task of mapping and enforcing them. The Algiers Accord of 1975, signed between Iraq and Iran, sought to resolve lingering disputes over the Shatt al-Arab and restore mu-tual confidence. Following the devastating Iran-Iraq War, the 1988 ceasefire agreement revalidat-ed the terms of the Algiers Accord, aiming to stabilize the frontier and prevent renewed hostili-ties.

Despite these formal agreements, the border crossings remain a strategic lever in Iran's efforts to exert influence over Iraq. Control over transit points enables Tehran to shape trade flows, support allied militias, and maintain a presence in key religious and economic zones. While many Iraqis express a desire to assert greater independence from Iranian interference, the political will to re-form border governance remains elusive. Entrenched interests, institutional inertia, and regional entanglements make such reform unlikely in the near term.

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The legacy of ancient mountain-lowland dynamics, imperial treaties, and modern border politics converge in southern Iraq—a region where history is not merely remembered but actively lived. Understanding this convergence is essential for any serious attempt to reimagine Iraq's sovereign-ty, regional role, and future trajectory. Would you like this adapted into a policy essay or integrat-ed into a broader strategic framework?

The West has until now been satisfied to make the parties fight it out among themselves, as long as the energy interests were not violated. But this will not work no longer, if the EU means business in the Middle East.

Since Iran has no genuine security interest beyond the Kurdish issue in Iraq, the EU-GCC have an inherent interest in insisting on " a comprehensive solution" to the bilateral border regime between Iran and Iran .

This requires the Algiers Accord be implemented and reimplemented or that a new treaty be drawn -up.

8.2.1 The Iran-Iraq Border regime

The Iran–Iraq Treaty on International Borders and Good Neighborly Relations, signed in Algiers in 1975, remains one of the most consequential legal instruments governing the territorial and dip-lomatic interface between the two states. Its design reflects the geopolitical imperatives of the time, while its governance architecture attempts to institutionalize stability across a historically volatile frontier . Yet, the treaty's durability has been repeatedly tested by war, regime change, and shifting regional alignments—raising urgent questions about its relevance and adaptability in the contemporary era.

The treaty's design is methodical and juridically sound. It is structured into discrete articles, each addressing a specific domain of bilateral engagement—from territorial delimitation to security coordination. The language is formal, legalistic, and deliberately precise, aiming to eliminate am-biguity and ensure enforceability. Crucially, the treaty is supplemented by detailed protocols and annexes, including cartographic attachments that delineate the land and river boundaries with technical specificity. These supplements are not peripheral—they are integral to the treaty's oper-ational clarity, particularly in contested zones such as the Shatt al-Arab waterway.

At its core, the treaty is anchored in three foundational principles. First, it affirms bilateral coop-eration through mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference, establishing a normative framework for peaceful coexistence. Second, it embeds mechanisms for dispute resolution, in-cluding arbitration and joint commissions, which are vital for de-escalating tensions and main-taining border stability. Third, it mandates firm security measures, requiring both parties to exer-cise control over their respective territories to prevent subversive activities and cross-border in-cursions.

Governance under the treaty is executed through a series of institutional arrangements. The Mixed Commission, established by the Algiers Accord, was tasked with re-demarcating the land and riv-er borders in accordance with the treaty's provisions. Its remit included not only technical bounda-ry work but also the implementation of attached protocols. The treaty also

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envisioned the creation of specialized committees—security committees to monitor and prevent destabilizing activities, and technical committees to manage the logistical and cartographic aspects of border mainte-nance.

The Border Demarcation Commission played a particularly critical role in the Shatt al-Arab re-gion, where hydrological shifts, sedimentation, and historical claims complicated the delineation process. The inclusion of maps in the treaty's annexes was essential for grounding legal claims in spatial reality, though these maps have often been contested or rendered obsolete by environmen-tal and infrastructural changes.

Both countries agreed to respect the frontier, refrain from supporting insurgent groups across the border, and avoid provocations that could escalate tensions. Security arrangements included com-mitments to ensure that neither state's territory would be used for hostile operations against the other, effectively reducing cross-border insurgency and military conflict. Supplementary protocols provided mechanisms for consultation and coordination on border incidents, allowing disputes to be resolved diplomatically rather than militarily. The treaty also implied cooperation in monitor-ing and controlling movement along the frontier, including river traffic, to maintain peace and stability. Overall, the security provisions operationalized a framework of mutual restraint, joint oversight, and diplomatic resolution, designed to stabilize a historically contentious boundary and prevent the recurrence of hostilities.

Over time, bilateral cooperation has evolved beyond the treaty's original scope. Recent agree-ments, such as the March 2023 security accord, reflect a renewed focus on countering armed groups and enhancing border surveillance. Economic and cultural cooperation has also expanded, with both countries signing multiple memoranda to facilitate trade, pilgrimage, and cultural ex-change. These developments suggest a pragmatic willingness to engage, even amid underlying tensions.

Nonetheless, demarcation remains fraught. The geographical complexity of the border—marked by rugged terrain, shifting riverbeds, and ambiguous tribal zones—has made precise delineation difficult. Tribal influence further complicates enforcement, as local actors often disregard formal boundaries in favor of customary allegiances and economic networks.

Policing and administrative strategies have been uneven. Joint patrols have been attempted but lack consistency and institutional depth. Surveillance technologies such as drones and satellite imagery offer promise but require coordinated deployment and data sharing. On the administra-tive front, border checkpoints have proliferated, yet their effectiveness is undermined by corrup-tion, poor infrastructure, and limited community trust. Engaging local populations in border man-agement—through intelligence gathering, service provision, and participatory governance—remains an underutilized but essential strategy.

In evaluating the treaty's legacy, it is clear that the Constantinople Protocol laid the groundwork for legal demarcation but suffered from weak enforcement and limited adaptability. The Algiers Accord, while more comprehensive, has faced implementation challenges, particularly during pe-riods of conflict and regime hostility. Its principles—

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territorial integrity, border inviolability, and non-interference—remain sound, but its mechanisms require modernization.

Given this context, the EU–GCC axis is uniquely positioned to advocate for a revised bilateral treaty. Such a treaty should not merely reaffirm existing boundaries but reimagine the border re-gime in light of contemporary threats—militia entrenchment, environmental degradation, and geopolitical manipulation. Iran's use of the land bridge to the Mediterranean, often framed as stra-tegic depth, must be counterbalanced by legal clarity, institutional transparency, and regional oversight.

A modern treaty should integrate digital cartography, joint environmental management, and third-party verification mechanisms. It must also embed human security principles—protecting border communities, regulating religious networks, and ensuring economic inclusion. The EU and GCC, with their normative leverage and financial instruments, can facilitate this process by convening technical dialogues, funding infrastructure, and supporting legal harmonization.

In sum, the 1975 treaty was a product of its time—ambitious, structured, and diplomatically sig-nificant. But the realities of 2025 demand a new architecture: one that preserves sovereignty while enabling cooperation, and one that transforms the border from a fault line into a framework for shared resilience. Would you like this expanded into a draft treaty framework or adapted for a diplomatic briefing to EU-GCC stakeholders?

8.2.3 The Treaty Regime between Iran and Iraq

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, the boundaries in the Middle East were largely defined by colonial-era treaties, mandates, and agreements. For the area that became Iraq and Iran's border:

- The Treaty of Zuhab (1639), often associated with Constantinople treaty discussions in historical literature, ended the Ottoman–Safavid War of 1623–1639. It confirmed territori-al divisions and helped establish the basic northwest–southeast line that roughly corre-sponds to the modern border between Iran and what later became the Ottoman province of Iraq

- The 1913 Protocol (sometimes referred to in treaty texts as the "Constantinople Protocol of 1913") served as the legal and technical basis for delimiting the land frontier that was later incorporated by reference into modern border agreements, including the 1975 Treaty concerning the State Frontier and Neighbourly Relations between Iran and Iraq. That treaty explicitly states it relied on the delimitation work of the 1913 Protocol and the minutes of the Delimitation Commission of 1914 as a basis for demarcating the land boundary, while adopting the thalweg principle for the river boundary

- Following the Ottoman collapse and British establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq (1920s), the 1937 treaty between Iraq and Iran formally codified the border along the Shatt al-Arab, but this treaty allowed Iraq control over the entire waterway, granting Iran limited navigation rights. This became a source of recurrent disputes.

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• The 1975 Algiers Accord, signed on March 6, 1975, between Iran and Iraq, was a landmark treaty aimed at resolving enduring territorial disputes, most notably concerning the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The accord represented a strategic exchange: Iran agreed to cease its support for Iraqi Kurdish insurgents, while Iraq formally recognized the thalweg—the riv-er's deepest navigable channel—as the official border. The agreement was signed by Mo-hammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran and Saddam Hussein, then Vice President of Iraq, un-der the auspices of Algerian mediation. It delineated the Shatt al-Arab river boundary ac-cording to the thalweg principle, thereby resolving long-standing disputes over navigation and sovereignty. By terminating its covert support for Kurdish rebel factions in northern Iraq, Iran conceded on a significant point of leverage, while Iraq sought to secure its southern border and limit Iranian influence in its internal affairs. Despite temporarily sta-bilizing bilateral relations, the treaty's provisions were unilaterally abrogated by Saddam Hussein in 1979–1980, directly precipitating the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. The Algiers Ac-cord is widely regarded as a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Although it was intended to establish lasting peace and clearly delineate boundaries, its eventual col-lapse underscores the fragility of treaties in a region marked by deep-seated territorial and political rivalries.

Thus, the original legal basis of the border is historical and multilateral, emerging from Otto-man-Persian agreements, colonial adjustments, and interwar treaties. The existing framework governing the Iraq–Iran border, anchored in the Algiers Accord of 1975 and reaffirmed through the 1988 ceasefire agreement, remains a cornerstone of bilateral relations. Yet, the geopolitical landscape has evolved dramatically since these instruments were signed.

After the Iran–Iraq War , the border was regulated primarily through United Nations–mediated ceasefire arrangements under Security Council Resolution 598, which required both parties to withdraw to the internationally recognized pre-war boundary. This withdrawal effectively restored the border demarcation established by the 1975 Algiers Agreement, including the application of the thalweg principle to the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Although Iraq had unilaterally renounced the 1975 accord in 1980, after the war both sides returned to the prewar territorial status quo, thereby reaffirming the Algiers Agreement's provisions as the operative border framework. The United Nations continued to monitor compliance and border stability through the mandate of the UN Iran–Iraq Military Observer Group into the early 1990s, ensuring that both parties respected the ceasefire and adhered to the established boundaries. While certain implementation issues, such as dredging and navigation on the Shatt al-Arab, remained unresolved, the essential effect of the ceasefire was to re-establish the territorial and maritime border according to international law and prior treaty commitments rather than through the creation of a new formal agreement in 1998. This combination of the ceasefire and the de facto reaffirmation of earlier border rules served as the regulatory framework for the Iran–Iraq boundary into the late 1990s and beyond, providing a basis for stability and limiting the potential for renewed large-scale conflict.

Even, today Iran and Iraq do not have a single formal treaty consolidating all aspects of their rela-tionship, but they operate under multiple bilateral agreements covering security, economic coop-eration, and border management. In recent years, both countries have signed security agreements obligating Iraq to prevent militant groups on its territory from launching attacks into Iran, as well as memoranda and cooperation frameworks aimed at enhancing trade, border control, and political coordination. Historic agreements, such as the 1975

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Algiers Accord, continue to serve as reference points for the Shatt al-Arab boundary, even though implementation has often been partial. The mosaic of current agreements reflects the practical reality that formal treaties alone are insuffi-cient without sustained institutional mechanisms and political will to enforce compliance.

A stable border regime between Iran and Iraq is essential for several reasons. First, it prevents the resurgence of cross-border conflicts by clearly delineating sovereignty and regulating navigation along contested waterways. Second, it enables effective cooperation in combating militant groups, smuggling, and illicit trafficking that exploit poorly defined boundaries. Third, a predictable bor-der framework facilitates economic integration, allowing both countries to develop trade corri-dors, industrial zones, and infrastructure projects without the risk of legal disputes or unilateral restrictions. Fourth, it supports social and cultural exchanges, including religious pilgrimages and cross-border communities, which are vital to regional stability. Fifth, a recognized and enforcea-ble border regime provides a foundation for long-term diplomacy, allowing both states to resolve disagreements peacefully rather than through coercion. In sum, a stable border is not merely a legal formality but a strategic necessity for security, economic growth, and the broader stability of the region.

The rise of non-state actors, the intensification of transnational smuggling, the politicization of religious networks, and the ecological degradation of shared resources—particularly in the Shatt al-Arab basin—have rendered the current treaty architecture increasingly obsolete. A modernized bilateral treaty is not only desirable but imperative.

A contemporary treaty must begin with a preamble that situates the agreement within its historical lineage, acknowledging the legacy of the Treaty of Erzurum, the Constantinople Protocol, and the Algiers Accord. It should affirm a mutual commitment to peaceful coexistence, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty, while referencing relevant UN Security Council Resolutions that frame international norms on border governance and conflict prevention.

Clarity in definitions is essential. Terms such as “border incident,” “militant activity,” “joint pa-trol,” and “resource corridor” must be precisely delineated to avoid interpretive ambiguity and legal loopholes. This semantic precision will underpin the treaty’s operational coherence.

Border delimitation must be revisited with technical rigor. Advances in geospatial mapping and satellite imagery allow for a more accurate and mutually verifiable delineation of the frontier. Updated maps and coordinates should be annexed to the treaty, reflecting both historical claims and contemporary realities. This is particularly critical in contested zones such as the Shatt al-Arab, where hydrological shifts and urban expansion have altered the physical landscape.

Security provisions must be robust and adaptive. The treaty should mandate joint patrols, integrat-ed surveillance systems, and the establishment of bilateral security posts in high-risk areas. These mechanisms must be complemented by protocols for rapid response, intelligence exchange, and coordinated counter-insurgency operations. Given the proliferation of militias and smuggling networks, security cooperation must extend beyond conventional military coordination to include cyber monitoring and financial tracking.

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Resource management is a linchpin of stability. The Shatt al-Arab's water flows, oil fields strad-dling the border, and shared agricultural zones require cooperative governance. The treaty should establish joint commissions for water allocation, environmental monitoring, and equitable extrac-tion of hydrocarbons. Transparent revenue-sharing models and third-party audits could mitigate suspicion and foster trust.

Trade and transit provisions must reflect the economic interdependence of border communities. Streamlined customs procedures, harmonized tariffs, and the development of cross-border infra-structure—such as roads, bridges, and logistics hubs—can transform the border from a site of fric-tion into a corridor of opportunity. Special economic zones and joint industrial parks could be explored as instruments of integration.

Conflict resolution mechanisms must be institutionalized. A standing bilateral commission, sup-ported by regional observers, should be empowered to investigate incidents, mediate disputes, and recommend binding arbitration. These mechanisms must be insulated from political interference and operate under clear procedural rules.

Environmental protection must be elevated from a peripheral concern to a strategic priority. Joint efforts to combat pollution, manage waste, and preserve biodiversity in the border region are es-sential for long-term sustainability. Climate resilience planning, including flood mitigation and drought response, should be embedded in the treaty's operational framework.

Cultural and social cooperation is vital for humanizing the border. Programs that promote cultural exchange, protect minority rights, and facilitate religious pilgrimages can build empathy and re-duce alienation. The treaty should safeguard the rights of border communities, ensuring access to education, healthcare, and legal protection.

Implementation and monitoring require a sequenced timeline, with benchmarks for progress and mechanisms for public reporting. Regular bilateral meetings, supported by technical subcommit-tees, can ensure accountability and adaptability.

Finally, the treaty must include provisions for amendment and termination. These clauses should be designed to accommodate evolving realities without undermining the treaty's integrity. Condi-tions for suspension or withdrawal must be clearly defined, with safeguards against unilateral ab-rogation.

The main issues of contention—territorial disputes, resource allocation, security concerns, politi-cal influence, and economic interests—must be addressed not as isolated irritants but as inter-linked domains requiring systemic solutions. Historical claims over the Shatt al-Arab, disagree-ments on demarcation, and competition over trade routes are symptoms of deeper structural ten-sions. A modern treaty must transcend reactive postures and offer a proactive blueprint for coex-istence.

In sum, the modernization of the Iraq–Iran border treaty is not a technical exercise but a strategic necessity. It must be grounded in historical awareness, informed by contemporary challenges, and animated by a vision of shared sovereignty and regional resilience. Would you like this adapted into a draft treaty preamble or expanded into a diplomatic briefing for multilateral stakeholders?

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Addressing the persistent challenges along the Iraq–Iran border demands more than tactical fixes or unilateral gestures. It requires a calibrated, multidimensional strategy rooted in mutual conces-sions, institutional trust-building, and a shared commitment to long-term cooperation. The border is not merely a line of demarcation—it is a living interface of trade, culture, security, and sover-eignty. A durable solution must therefore integrate technological vigilance, infrastructural resili-ence, intelligence coordination, community empowerment, and diplomatic foresight.

The first imperative is to elevate surveillance capacity. Deploying advanced technologies such as aerial drones, satellite imaging, and thermal sensors can provide real-time monitoring of critical transit zones and porous stretches. These tools must be embedded within a joint operational framework, with monitoring centers staffed by both Iraqi and Iranian personnel to ensure transpar-ency, reduce miscommunication, and foster operational synergy.

Infrastructure development is equally vital. Upgrading roads, checkpoints, and logistical hubs along the frontier will not only enhance mobility and response times but also signal state presence in historically neglected regions. In high-risk zones, the construction of physical barriers—designed with ecological and humanitarian sensitivity—can deter unauthorized crossings and smuggling without disrupting legitimate movement.

Intelligence cooperation must be institutionalized. A robust framework for intelligence sharing, encompassing digital platforms and secure communication protocols, can help track militant net-works, arms flows, and illicit financing. Regular joint training exercises between Iraqi and Iranian security forces will build interoperability, reduce friction, and cultivate a shared operational lan-guage.

Community engagement is the linchpin of sustainable border governance. Local populations must be treated not as passive subjects but as active partners. Initiatives that involve tribal leaders, civil society actors, and youth networks can generate grassroots intelligence, foster trust, and counter radicalization. Development programs targeting education, healthcare, and employment in border districts will address the socio-economic grievances that often fuel instability.

Diplomatic architecture must underpin these efforts. Strengthening bilateral channels between Baghdad and Tehran is essential for resolving disputes over demarcation, transit rights, and juris-dictional ambiguities. These dialogues should be nested within broader regional platforms—potentially involving Turkey, the GCC, and international observers—to ensure that border security is approached as a collective responsibility rather than a zero-sum contest.

This integrated action plan does not merely aim to fortify the Iraq–Iran border against immediate threats. It seeks to transform the frontier into a zone of cooperation, resilience, and shared pros-perity. By aligning surveillance, infrastructure, intelligence, community engagement, and diplo-macy, Iraq and Iran can move beyond reactive postures toward a strategic partnership that respects sovereignty while promoting regional stability.

8.2.2 The Dynamics of the Iraq-Iran Border and the Role of Tribal Networks

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

The Iraq-Iran border is not merely a line on a map; it is a dynamic and historically layered space shaped by diverse tribal, ethnic, and socio-political networks. Tribal dynamics are a defining fea-ture of this frontier, influencing governance, security, and local economies. Among the most sig-nificant groups are the Kurds, predominantly located in the northern regions of both Iraq and Iran. Kurdish tribes, divided into various clans, maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity and a longstanding aspiration for greater autonomy, which has historically shaped both their relations with central governments and their approach to border control. Arab tribes inhabit the southern reaches of the border region, particularly in areas such as Basra in Iraq and Khuzestan in Iran. These tribes are closely tied to the broader Arab world and exert considerable influence in local political and economic spheres. In the western borderlands of Iran, the Lurs are notable for their distinct language, culture, and mountainous settlements, while the Bakhtiaris, a nomadic subgroup of the Lurs, maintain traditional seasonal migration patterns that traverse the border. Smaller groups such as the Turkmen, residing mainly in northeastern Iraq and northwestern Iran, add an-other layer of cultural and linguistic diversity to the region, reflecting the complex historical lega-cies of settlement and migration.

Tribal structures have consistently influenced the operational dynamics of border security. Kurd-ish tribes, for instance, with their pronounced sense of autonomy, have often resisted direct con-trol from central authorities, occasionally leading to friction with state security forces and com-plicating coordinated border management. Similarly, the Bakhtiari and other Lur tribes adhere to traditional governance systems and maintain independent decision-making practices, which can limit the effectiveness of state interventions. Nomadic lifestyles further contribute to the fluidity of the border, as frequent cross-border movement by Bakhtiaris, Kurds, and other groups chal-lenges conventional monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. This mobility is intertwined with local economies; tribal networks have historically engaged in trade and, at times, smuggling of goods and weapons, activities that both sustain livelihoods and complicate formal state control.

The interactions among tribal groups themselves also shape the security landscape. Alliances may form within or across ethnic lines, occasionally involving non-state actors or external powers, which can shift local balances of influence and affect the efficacy of border management. At the same time, inter-tribal conflicts may escalate, undermining stability and creating security vacu-ums. However, these communities also represent a valuable asset: their deep local knowledge and established intelligence networks can enhance surveillance, threat identification, and rapid re-sponse if effectively engaged and integrated into state strategies. Policies that fail to account for tribal autonomy, traditions, and social hierarchies risk alienating local populations, while cultural-ly sensitive engagement can foster cooperation and legitimacy.

Effective management of the Iraq-Iran border therefore demands a multifaceted approach that blends enforcement with collaboration. Building trust and including tribal leaders in decision-making processes is crucial. Regular consultation with communities helps identify local concerns and ensures that security strategies are responsive to the realities on the ground. Respecting cul-tural norms, including traditional customs and governance practices, is equally essential, as it pre-vents antagonizing communities and encourages compliance with agreed measures. Socio-economic development plays a complementary role: improving

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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living conditions through infra-structure projects, healthcare and education investments, and job creation reduces incentives for illicit activities and strengthens tribal investment in border stability. Moreover, tribes themselves can be recruited into border security roles, leveraging their mobility, local knowledge, and social influence to enhance surveillance and monitoring operations.

Enhanced border infrastructure, such as roads, checkpoints, and communication networks, coupled with improvements in community services, facilitates both state oversight and positive engage-ment with local populations. Conflict resolution mechanisms that incorporate mediation, dialogue, and peacebuilding initiatives help prevent inter-tribal disputes from escalating into violence, fos-tering cooperation and long-term stability. Legal and policy reforms are also necessary to codify tribal rights, recognize traditional governance structures, and provide frameworks for participa-tion in border management. Cross-border collaboration with neighboring states and engagement with international organizations for capacity-building, development support, and technical assis-tance further reinforce the region's resilience and stability.

In conclusion, tribal dynamics are a central determinant of security and governance along the Iraq-Iran border. Effective strategies must recognize and integrate these dynamics, combining en-forcement, intelligence, and technological support with inclusive governance, socio-economic development, and culturally informed engagement. By doing so, Iraq can achieve more sustainable border management, enhancing both national security and the well-being of the diverse communi-ties that inhabit these historically rich and strategically critical frontier regions.

The complex tribal, social, and geopolitical interactions along the Syrian-Iraqi frontier underscore that fostering a stable and well-managed border regime is not merely a matter of state control, but a strategic necessity for regional security, local governance, and the prevention of external inter-ference. Unlike the Iraq-Iran frontier, which has long been shaped by sectarian divides and period-ic conflict, the Syrian-Iraqi border reflects centuries of social, cultural, and tribal affinity, where familial ties and shared historical experiences have created a network of cross-border connections that make the stability of this border regime crucial not only for state security but also for pre-serving the continuity of local social and economic systems.

8.2.3 The Syrian-Iraqi Border: Historical Continuities and Strategic Significance

The Syrian-Iraqi border represents one of the most porous and contested frontiers in the Middle East. It is not merely a line on the map but a complex socio-political space shaped by historical, tribal, and transboundary dynamics. Unlike conventional borders, the Syria-Iraq frontier is charac-terized by strong non-state networks, cross-border kinship ties, and long-standing tribal affilia-tions. These dynamics have persisted across time, surviving colonial-era boundary demarcations, post-colonial state-building, and contemporary conflicts. The region's significance has only in-creased in the context of post-ISIS stabilization efforts, domestic reforms in Iraq, and the in-volvement of international actors seeking to influence regional balance. Consolidating the man-agement of this border is therefore a strategic

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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priority, demanding a nuanced approach that acknowledges both historical constants and contemporary pressures.

Tribal networks are central to the social fabric along the Syria-Iraq border. Among the most prom-inent are the Shammar, one of the largest and most influential tribal confederations spanning both countries, with a significant presence in the Jazira region. The Aniza tribe similarly extends across the border, maintaining economic and familial links that predate the modern state system. Al-Jabbur, another major tribal confederation, also exerts considerable influence in the borderlands. These tribes not only maintain traditional governance structures but also play pivotal roles in cross-border trade, informal smuggling networks, and local dispute resolution. Their autonomy, however, has been increasingly challenged by the presence of non-state actors, including Iranian-backed militias, which seek to leverage tribal networks for strategic purposes, thereby complicat-ing the dynamics of local governance.

The tribal structures along the Syria-Iraq border offer insights that are often overlooked by high-level diplomatic frameworks such as the Astana Dialogue, in which Turkey, Iran, and Russia im-pose top-down arrangements. While the Astana process prioritizes state-centric negotiations and geopolitical alignment, it frequently neglects local realities, particularly the significance of tribal affiliations, historical grievances, and socio-economic interdependencies. By contrast, a locally grounded approach that incorporates tribal perspectives can enhance both the legitimacy and ef-fectiveness of border management initiatives.

Counteracting external influence, particularly Iranian penetration, requires a strategy that strengthens local governance and builds resilience within tribal networks. Empowering tribal leaders and enhancing their administrative autonomy can reduce dependence on external actors, while fostering alliances with the Shammar, Aniza, and Al-Jabbur confederations can create a more cohesive local front. Integrating these tribal networks into Iraq's broader border manage-ment framework would ensure that local knowledge, traditional authority, and social cohesion are leveraged for national security objectives, rather than bypassed or undermined.

Border security can be enhanced through a combination of technology, local engagement, and in-novative operational approaches. Advanced surveillance tools, including drones and sensor net-works, can provide real-time monitoring, while joint patrols involving local security forces and international partners can deter illegal crossings and contraband trade. Given the harsh desert ter-rain of the region, unconventional solutions such as a camel-borne border management corps offer significant advantages. Camels provide mobility in areas inaccessible to vehicles, reduce logisti-cal burdens, and offer cost-effective sustainability. Moreover, the cultural resonance of camels can facilitate cooperation with local tribes and foster intelligence-sharing, drawing on historical precedents such as the Somaliland Camel Corps. This approach also minimizes environmental impact while enabling versatile roles ranging from patrol and surveillance to the transport of sup-plies.

Economic development and humanitarian assistance are equally essential in consolidating border security and resilience. Investment in infrastructure projects can generate employment, improve living standards, and reduce the appeal of external patronage. Consistent delivery of humanitarian aid reinforces trust between local populations and state institutions,

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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strengthening the social con-tract and mitigating vulnerabilities that external actors might exploit. Counter-propaganda and information campaigns further complement these efforts by promoting accurate local media cov-erage, public diplomacy, and awareness of the risks posed by foreign interference.

Finally, international and regional coordination is indispensable. Engagement with partners such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey can facilitate intelligence sharing, joint planning, and multi-lateral efforts to stabilize the border region. Leveraging international forums, including the United Nations, can highlight external interference and build consensus around locally grounded govern-ance and security strategies.

In sum, the Syrian-Iraqi border exemplifies a space where historical continuities, tribal dynamics, and modern geopolitical pressures intersect. Effective management of this frontier requires an approach that balances technological innovation, local governance empowerment, economic de-velopment, and international diplomacy. By integrating tribal networks into formal border man-agement structures, employing culturally and environmentally adapted security solutions such as camel-borne units, and fostering regional cooperation, Iraq can consolidate control over this criti-cal border while mitigating external influence and promoting long-term stability.

8.3 The Southern Arabs

Samuel Noah Kramer's History Begins at Sumer remains a seminal work not merely for its cata-log of civilizational "firsts," but for its profound implications regarding the origins of political order, cultural expression, and institutional memory. In chronicling the achievements of the Su-merians—who flourished in southern Mesopotamia during the third millennium BCE—Kramer does more than recount historical curiosities; he reveals the scaffolding upon which much of mod-ern governance, diplomacy, and social organization rests.

Among the most striking contributions:

Education and Bureaucracy: Sumer's invention of formal schooling, centered around the train-ing of scribes in cuneiform, laid the foundation for bureaucratic governance and record-keeping. This institutionalization of knowledge production remains a cornerstone of statecraft today.

Diplomacy and Warfare: The Sumerians pioneered early forms of inter-polity negotiation and conflict resolution, foreshadowing the principles of sovereignty, alliance-building, and strategic deterrence that underpin contemporary international relations.

City-State Governance: Their development of autonomous city-states, each governed by a ruler and sanctified by a patron deity, prefigures the modern tension between local autonomy and cen-tral authority—a dynamic still visible in federal systems and tribal governance structures across the Middle East.

Legal and Political Institutions: The emergence of parliamentary assemblies and judicial courts in Sumer marks the genesis of deliberative governance and codified justice, offering a

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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historical lens through which to assess current efforts at constitutional reform and rule-of-law consolidation.

Ethical and Cosmological Thought: Sumerian myths and moral codes—ranging from flood nar-ratives to resurrection legends—continue to echo through Abrahamic traditions and inform collec-tive understandings of justice, suffering, and redemption.

Cultural Production: Their literary innovations, including proverbs, fables, and love songs, re-veal a society deeply attuned to human emotion, social critique, and aesthetic expression. These texts not only shaped later Mesopotamian cultures but also resonate with contemporary debates on identity, loyalty, and belonging.

In light of these achievements, it becomes possible to frame the question of Southern Iraqi Arab loyalty not as a rupture from historical continuity, but as part of a longer arc of political negotia-tion, cultural pluralism, and regional integration. The Sumerian legacy—rooted in southern Iraq—offers a powerful counter-narrative to claims of fragmentation or external dependency. It affirms that the region has long been a crucible of innovation, governance, and spiritual depth.

To translate this historical resonance into actionable policy, particularly in the context of Iran's engagement with Iraq and the EU-GCC dialogue on Khuzestan, a nuanced package of commit-ments could be proposed:

1. Affirmation of Iraqi Sovereignty

Iran should publicly and unequivocally affirm Iraq's territorial integrity, especially in relation to Najaf and Karbala. This includes refraining from unilateral religious or political interventions and recognizing Baghdad's primacy in managing internal affairs.

2. Strengthening Local Governance

Support for decentralized governance structures in southern Iraq—aligned with Baghdad yet re-sponsive to local needs—can reinforce civic loyalty. Capacity-building for municipal councils, tribal leaders, and religious institutions should be prioritized.

3. Codified Non-Interference

A formal non-interference agreement, endorsed by Iran, the EU, and the GCC, would serve as a confidence-building measure. It should include mechanisms for monitoring religious exchanges, media influence, and militia activity in sensitive zones.

4. Economic Integration and Incentives

Joint investment in southern Iraq's infrastructure, agriculture, and vocational training can create tangible benefits for communities. These incentives should be tied to transparency benchmarks and local participation, ensuring that loyalty is earned through inclusion, not coercion.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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5. Coordinated Security Frameworks

Tripartite security cooperation—between Iraq, Iran, and GCC states—can address cross-border threats, smuggling networks, and extremist infiltration. Southern Iraq should be treated not as a buffer zone but as a shared security responsibility.

6. Cultural and Religious Safeguards

Iran's engagement in Najaf and Karbala must be framed as spiritual solidarity, not political pat-ronage. Joint cultural initiatives, interfaith dialogues, and heritage preservation projects can rein-force mutual respect and reduce sectarian instrumentalization.

By anchoring these proposals in both historical precedent and contemporary necessity, the dis-course on Southern Arab loyalty can be reframed—not as a question of allegiance, but as an op-portunity for renewal. The Sumerian legacy reminds us that southern Iraq has long been a source of civilizational leadership. The task now is to ensure that this legacy informs, rather than eludes, the region's future. Southern Iraq faces a constellation of strategic challenges rooted in historical marginalization, geopolitical exposure, and institutional fragility. These challenges are structural, intersecting with questions of identity, sovereignty, and regional power dynamics. Addressing them requires a mul-ti-tiered strategy that blends internal reform with calibrated external partnerships.

Governance in the southern provinces—particularly Basra, Dhi Qar, Maysan, and Muthanna—is undermined by a persistent vacuum of state authority. Local populations often rely on tribal net-works and informal actors to fill the void left by an unresponsive central government. This ab-sence of legitimate governance fuels discontent and opens space for external influence, eroding trust in Baghdad and weakening national cohesion.

Economically, southern Iraq remains paradoxically stagnant despite its vast oil wealth. Infrastruc-ture is dilapidated, youth unemployment is rampant, and basic services such as water, electricity, and healthcare are chronically underfunded. The disconnect between resource abundance and de-velopmental outcomes breeds resentment and undermines civic loyalty. Environmental degradation compounds these pressures. Desertification, salinization, and declin-ing water flows from the Tigris and Euphrates—exacerbated by upstream damming in Turkey and Iran—threaten agriculture, public health, and urban sustainability. Climate stress is becoming a driver of migration, social unrest, and long-term instability. Security fragmentation further complicates the landscape. Iran-aligned militias, tribal armed groups, and politically affiliated paramilitaries operate with impunity, distorting local governance and intimidating civil society. The blurred line between state and non-state actors undermines efforts to build a unified national security architecture and reinforces cycles of violence and im-punity.

Identity politics in southern Iraq are often oversimplified. While the region is predominantly Shia, internal divisions between clerical authorities, tribal leaders, and political factions are profound. External actors have exploited these divisions to cultivate influence, making loyalty to Baghdad contingent rather than assured. To address these challenges, Iraq must recalibrate its institutional architecture. Decentralized gov-ernance should be pursued through empowered provincial councils with fiscal autonomy and ad-ministrative capacity, supported

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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by constitutional clarity and anti-corruption safeguards. Public service delivery must be prioritized, with transparent use of oil revenues linked to citizen feed-back mechanisms.

Economic reanimation is essential. Special economic zones in Basra and Nasiriyah could attract Gulf and European investment, focusing on logistics, petrochemicals, and agribusiness. Vocation-al training and support for small and medium enterprises, in partnership with the EU and UNDP, would create employment pathways and stimulate local entrepreneurship. Environmental diplomacy must be elevated. Iraq should engage Turkey and Iran through trilateral frameworks, possibly mediated by the EU, to negotiate equitable water-sharing and ecological restoration. Collaboration with Germany, the Netherlands, and UNEP could support climate-resilient urban planning and renewable energy initiatives.

Security sector reform is urgent. A phased program to integrate vetted militia members into na-tional forces, with oversight from the UN and regional monitors, would help restore state authori-ty. Community policing initiatives, supported by EUJUST LEX and GCC security academies, could rebuild trust and enhance local security. Cultural and religious diplomacy must also be refined. Dialogue between Najaf's religious author-ities and Baghdad should be facilitated to reinforce national unity, while Iran must be encouraged to respect the autonomy of Iraqi clerics. Heritage preservation and inclusive identity projects, in partnership with UNESCO and the Arab League, would promote cohesion and counter sectarian instrumentalization.

Key partners in this endeavor include the European Union for governance reform and economic diversification, the Gulf Cooperation Council for infrastructure investment and counter-extremism, Iran as a necessary interlocutor engaged through structured and transparent frame-works, the United Nations for technical assistance and legitimacy, and Turkey for water diploma-cy and regional connectivity.

Southern Iraq is not a periphery—it is a crucible. Its stabilization is not a local matter but a re-gional imperative. Reform must be strategic, sequenced, and anchored in partnerships that respect Iraqi sovereignty while enabling transformation.

Figure 8 – Afro-Iranian

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Source: http://www.mahdi-ehsaei.com/afro iran/yfqvldx8phhskaq1y9rjjgh9ekop6d

Did the Mahdi become shrouded for Iran not to complete the modernisation of its polity, engage in constructive diplomacy and engage in economic transition instead of turning the tables on abusive authorities and setting out for vengeful conquest?

So little has Iran achieved for so much work that one should be odd not to be bitter. Instead, its rulers should recall that the future belongs to him with the longest memory and that we as humans are the same.

9.0 EU AND TURKEY'S ROLE IN IRAK

The European Union's engagement in Iraq has been primarily shaped by its twin objectives of supporting stabilization and reconstruction while promoting governance reforms, rule of law, and human-rights compliance. Since the 2003 intervention and the subsequent periods of insurgency and sectarian conflict, the EU has deployed a combination of diplomatic, technical, and financial instruments, including civilian missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), capacity-building programs for Iraqi institutions, and extensive humanitarian assistance targeting internally displaced persons, vulnerable communities, and post-conflict regions. Beyond security and governance, the EU has sought to foster long-term economic engagement through trade facili-tation, technical cooperation in energy, agriculture, and infrastructure, and investment promotion initiatives, although these efforts have consistently been constrained by ongoing political instabil-ity, security concerns, and fragmented regulatory frameworks across both federal and regional governments.

Over the past two decades, EU–Iraq trade relations have experienced gradual expansion, though at a slower pace than regional competitors such as China, Turkey, and Gulf states. European exports to Iraq have largely concentrated on industrial machinery, pharmaceuticals, transport equipment, and energy-related technology, reflecting both Iraq's reconstruction needs and the EU's compara-tive advantages in high-value manufactured goods. Imports from Iraq to the EU have been domi-nated by oil and energy products, though these flows remain relatively limited compared to Mid-dle Eastern and global suppliers. Despite security challenges and volatile oil revenues, trade link-ages have been steadily formalized through bilateral agreements, EU technical assistance pro-grams aimed at customs modernization, and regulatory alignment initiatives that facilitate market access for European firms, particularly in the context of the EU–Iraq Joint Committee framework.

Foreign direct investment from the EU into Iraq has evolved slowly, primarily targeting energy, infrastructure, telecommunications, and select service sectors, with particular concentration in Baghdad, the southern oil provinces, and the Kurdistan Region. EU firms have been cautious in-vestors due to persistent security risks, bureaucratic complexity, and fluctuating regulatory and fiscal regimes, often entering via joint ventures with local partners or public-private partnerships to mitigate exposure. Over time, EU investment has increasingly emphasized knowledge transfer, capacity-building, and compliance with international standards, signaling a strategic orientation toward sustainable reconstruction rather than speculative short-term profit. Despite these con-straints, the EU remains a significant actor in Iraq's development landscape, complementing US, Turkish, Chinese, and

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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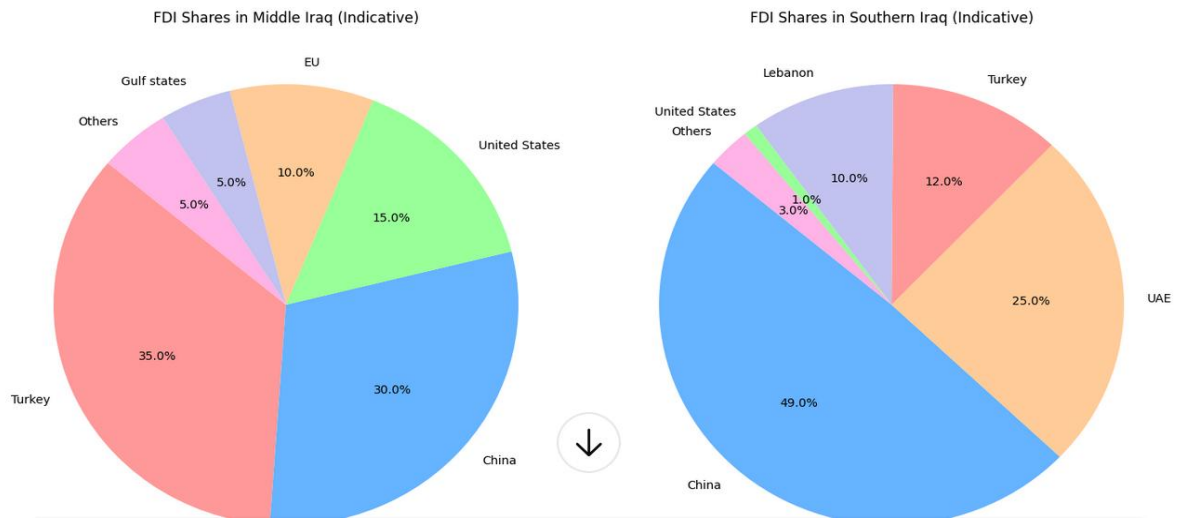
Gulf investments, and leveraging its policy tools to balance economic en-gagement with normative objectives, including transparency, governance reform, and adherence to international labor and environmental standards.

Figure



The two pie charts illustrate the distribution of foreign direct investment in Middle and Southern Iraq. In Middle Iraq, Turkey holds the largest share at 35 percent, followed closely by China at 30 percent. The United States accounts for 15 percent, the European Union 10 percent, Gulf states 5 percent, and other countries make up the remaining 5 percent. This distribution suggests that Tur-key and China are the dominant investors in central Iraq, reflecting strong engagement in infra-structure, construction, and trade-linked projects. The EU and Gulf states maintain a smaller pres-ence, primarily focused on reconstruction, technical cooperation, and governance-related initia-tives.

In Southern Iraq, investment is much more concentrated, with China accounting for nearly half of total FDI at 49 percent. The United Arab Emirates follows with 25 percent, Turkey with 12 per-cent, Lebanon with 10 percent, the United States with 1 percent, and other investors at 3 percent. The heavy Chinese and Gulf presence in the south reflects the region's oil-rich economy, where energy and extractive industries dominate investment patterns. European participation is minimal, highlighting a cautious EU approach that prioritizes sustainable development, regulatory compli-ance, and governance support over resource extraction.

The comparison between the two regions reveals clear regional differentiation in Iraq's invest-ment landscape. Middle Iraq attracts a more diversified set of investors, drawn by reconstruction and infrastructure opportunities, while Southern Iraq is dominated by actors with strong interests in energy and natural resources. The limited EU share indicates a deliberate focus on long-term development and normative engagement rather than rapid capital deployment in high-risk, re-source-dominated sectors. Overall, these charts illustrate how geopolitical, economic, and sectoral factors shape foreign investment in Iraq, with regional dynamics influencing both the composition and concentration of investor activity.

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EU economic engagement in Iraq has been highly regionally differentiated, reflecting both securi-ty conditions and the structure of local economies. In Middle Iraq, particularly Baghdad, Diyala, and Salahuddin, EU investment has focused on reconstruction contracts, energy infrastructure, telecommunications, and public-sector modernization. European firms have leveraged partner-ships with local contractors and international donors to access these markets, balancing security risks with the need for market entry. Trade flows in Middle Iraq are characterized by machinery, pharmaceuticals, and construction materials, reflecting both the EU's industrial strengths and Iraq's reconstruction requirements. Investment has been incremental, often tied to EU-funded de-velopment programs, which provide both financial support and risk mitigation for companies op-erating in fragile environments.

In Southern Iraq, the EU's FDI footprint has been smaller relative to China and Gulf investors, who dominate oil and energy sectors, but European firms remain active in downstream infrastruc-ture, water management, and transport logistics. EU policy tools, including technical assistance and advisory missions, have facilitated regulatory alignment, procurement transparency, and ad-herence to environmental standards, helping to make EU investments more sustainable and social-ly responsible. Over time, EU-led projects have increasingly emphasized local capacity-building, encouraging knowledge transfer and workforce development to complement direct capital flows. Trade linkages in the south have expanded modestly, particularly in machinery and industrial equipment, but overall EU market share remains constrained by competition from lower-cost sup-pliers in China and the Gulf.

European investment has also been shaped by multilateral frameworks, such as the EU–Iraq Joint Committee and the European Investment Bank's regional programs, which seek to integrate FDI with broader development and governance objectives. Despite security and governance challenges, EU engagement provides a stabilizing counterweight in Iraq's investment landscape, offering an alternative to purely profit-driven flows and promoting transparency. Coordination with other in-ternational actors, including the United States, Turkey, and Gulf states, allows the EU to influence regulatory reforms and encourage joint ventures that combine foreign capital with local employ-ment generation. EU investment tends to prioritize sectors with long-term developmental impact rather than speculative short-term gains, reinforcing linkages between FDI, employment, and re-gional stability. While EU trade and investment growth has been gradual, the cumulative effect has been the establishment of enduring commercial and institutional relationships across Iraq. These engagements help build the foundation for future scaling of EU economic presence as secu-rity conditions improve. Finally, EU FDI serves as both an economic and normative instrument, promoting good governance, environmental compliance, and social inclusion, even in regions where market dominance is limited.

Turkey and Iraq

In Iraq's ongoing journey toward modernization and strategic autonomy, both the European Union and Turkey have emerged as pivotal interlocutors—each offering distinct yet complementary ave-nues for engagement, reform, and regional integration.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The European Union, with its normative power and institutional depth, has positioned itself as a partner in governance reform, human rights, and economic diversification. Through instruments such as the EU–Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, Brussels supports Iraq's efforts to strengthen rule of law, rebuild infrastructure, and foster civil society. EU member states also con-tribute to stabilization through development aid, electoral support, and technical assistance in en-ergy and environmental management. Crucially, the EU's engagement is framed not as patronage but as capacity-building—anchoring Iraq's modernization in institutional resilience and regional diplomacy.

Turkey, by contrast, engages Iraq through a more transactional and geographically proximate lens. As a major trading partner and energy corridor, Ankara facilitates economic integration and infra-structure development, particularly in northern Iraq. Turkish firms are active in construction, lo-gistics, and energy services, while bilateral agreements have expanded cooperation on water man-agement, border security, and counterterrorism. Politically, Turkey navigates a delicate balance—supporting Iraq's territorial integrity while maintaining influence in Kurdish regions and Sunni constituencies.

Together, the EU and Turkey offer Iraq a diversified partnership architecture: one rooted in nor-mative reform, the other in pragmatic connectivity. By engaging both, Iraq avoids overdependence on any single axis and reinforces its role as a sovereign actor capable of shaping its own moderni-zation trajectory. This multipolar diplomacy—anchored in strategic pluralism—is essential to Iraq's emergence as a balanced and resilient state in a volatile region.

9.1 The Role of Baghdad

Iraq's foreign policy is deeply shaped by its modern history, which has left a legacy of both inter-nal fragility and regional entanglements. The early twentieth century saw Iraq under monarchical rule, with foreign policy largely dictated by shifting alliances among Western powers, neighbor-ing Arab states, and, occasionally, the Soviet Union. The Ba'athist era under Saddam Hussein marked a period of assertive regional ambition, characterized by both the Iran-Iraq War and the invasion of Kuwait. These episodes reflected a combination of expansionist aspiration and acute insecurity regarding both regional rivals and domestic opposition. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion fundamentally transformed Iraq's foreign policy landscape, leaving the state fragmented and heavily dependent on external actors for security, reconstruction, and political legitimacy.

The central driver of Baghdad's contemporary foreign policy is the imperative of security, both internal and external. Domestically, the government must navigate complex sectarian dynamics among Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish populations while contending with the political influence of mili-tias and periodic waves of civil unrest. Externally, Iraq faces a delicate balancing act among pow-erful regional and global actors. Iran exerts considerable influence through Shia militias and polit-ical networks, requiring Baghdad to cooperate pragmatically while simultaneously asserting sov-ereignty. Relations with Saudi Arabia are cautiously managed: Baghdad seeks to develop econom-ic and diplomatic ties with the Gulf while avoiding alignment that could undermine domestic le-gitimacy or provoke Iranian ire. Similarly, Iraq's engagement with Turkey is informed by a need to protect territorial integrity

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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and manage Kurdish-related security concerns, yet trade, energy, and economic interdependence remain important objectives. Iraq's Gulf neighbors and Turkey represent not only immediate regional partners but also avenues for investment, trade, and diversi-fication of foreign influence.

Iraq's foreign policy also reflects strategic objectives in relation to global actors such as the Euro-pean Union and the United States. With the EU, Iraq seeks developmental support, investment in reconstruction, and political legitimacy within international forums. The EU is viewed primarily as an economic and diplomatic partner rather than a security guarantor. The United States, by con-trast, continues to influence Iraq's security environment, particularly in counterterrorism opera-tions and military assistance, although Baghdad's policy is increasingly calibrated to avoid over-dependence and to assert strategic autonomy. Iraq also maintains a keen interest in the broader Caucasus region, seeking trade, energy, and diplomatic linkages that could expand its strategic depth and serve as a corridor connecting the Levant, Gulf, and wider Eurasian markets.

Maximizing influence in the Levant, Gulf, and Caucasus requires Baghdad to pursue a multifacet-ed strategy. In the Levant, Iraq can leverage its historical ties with Syria and Jordan to act as a mediator in regional disputes, support stabilization efforts, and facilitate economic and infrastruc-ture projects that deepen political influence. Within the Gulf, Baghdad can strengthen its econom-ic role by expanding trade, energy partnerships, and investment projects with both Gulf Coopera-tion Council members and non-Gulf Arab states, while carefully navigating the Saudi-Iranian ri-valry to maintain a neutral, stabilizing posture. Engagement with Iran remains a necessary but cautious component of this strategy, balancing cooperation on security and trade with the impera-tive of retaining sovereign decision-making. In the Caucasus, Iraq can cultivate diplomatic and economic relationships with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, positioning itself as a conduit for trade, energy flows, and regional diplomacy, thereby enhancing its strategic footprint beyond the immediate Arab neighborhood.

Baghdad's overall approach to its neighborhood and wider regional environment is thus character-ized by risk aversion, pragmatic hedging, and strategic adaptability. By balancing competing in-fluences from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the EU, and global powers, Iraq seeks to secure internal stability while enhancing its regional and extraregional relevance. Economic diplomacy, media-tion, and non-alignment form the pillars of its foreign policy, allowing Baghdad to preserve sov-ereignty, mitigate threats, and exploit opportunities in a complex and volatile geopolitical land-scape. Ultimately, Iraq's foreign policy reflects an ongoing effort to translate its geographical cen-trality, energy resources, and historical connections into influence across the Levant, Gulf, and Caucasus, while carefully navigating the intricate web of domestic and external pressures that define its security calculus.

Iraq's evolving relationships with India and Egypt reflect a strategic balancing act rooted in eco-nomic pragmatism, historical depth, and regional diplomacy. These ties offer Baghdad a platform to mediate between divergent geopolitical poles—South Asia's rising power and North Africa's assertive regional actor—while subtly positioning itself as a bridge between competing interests.

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India views Iraq as a vital energy partner and a gateway to West Asia. Historical ties—dating back to Mesopotamian-Indus trade routes and reinforced during the Non-Aligned Movement era—have matured into pragmatic cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and education. Iraq supplies crude oil to India, while New Delhi invests in reconstruction and capacity-building initiatives. This rela-tionship is transactional but stable, allowing Iraq to engage a non-Western power without entan-gling itself in ideological or sectarian rivalries.

Egypt, by contrast, shares with Iraq a legacy of pan-Arab ambition and post-colonial statecraft. Their revived Joint Higher Committee and trilateral integration efforts with Jordan signal a desire to build an Arab-centric economic and political bloc that can counterbalance Gulf dominance. Egypt's mediation experience in Libya and Palestine complements Iraq's own aspirations to be a stabilizing force in the Levant and Mesopotamia.

In this context, Iraq mediates not between India and Egypt per se, but between spheres of influ-ence—South Asian, Arab, and increasingly Eurasian. It balances these by offering itself as a neu-tral convening space (e.g., the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership), a logistical hub, and a diplomatic interlocutor.

India and Egypt's relationships with Baghdad are not merely bilateral conveniences—they are strategic instruments that reflect each country's broader foreign policy ambitions, while offering Iraq a platform to recalibrate its own sovereignty and regional relevance.

India's calculus is driven by energy security and multipolar engagement. Iraq is one of India's top oil suppliers, and New Delhi's investments in infrastructure and education in Iraq serve its ambi-tion to deepen ties across West Asia without entangling itself in sectarian or ideological fault lines. This fits India's "Look West" policy, which seeks stable partnerships in the Gulf and Levant to counterbalance Chinese and Pakistani influence. Iraq, in turn, leverages this relationship to di-versify its economic dependencies and signal openness to Asian powers beyond Iran and China.

Egypt's engagement is more ideologically and regionally embedded. Cairo sees Baghdad as a linchpin in its trilateral alliance with Jordan, aimed at reviving Arab-centric cooperation and countering Turkish and Iranian influence. Egypt's foreign policy—shaped by its mediation roles in Libya and Palestine, and its participation in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum—uses Iraq as a partner in building a moderate, economically integrated Arab bloc. Baghdad benefits by anchoring itself in Arab legitimacy while avoiding overreliance on Gulf monarchies.

Balancing Tehran is Baghdad's most delicate act. Iraq shares deep religious, economic, and politi-cal ties with Iran, yet it resists becoming a proxy. Baghdad's strategy hinges on three mechanisms:

1. Diversification of partnerships: By deepening ties with India, Egypt, the EU, and Turkey, Iraq dilutes Iranian leverage.
2. Security sector reform: Iraq has invited U.S. and European advisors to help restructure its mili-tary and police, reducing dependence on Iran-backed militias.
3. Economic autonomy: Baghdad is slowly reducing its energy and trade dependence on Iran, seeking alternative suppliers and routes.

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Regaining former greatness—as a civilizational and geopolitical center—requires Iraq to embrace a multi-vector strategy rooted in sovereignty, pluralism, and infrastructure. The conditions for this renaissance include:

- Institutional resilience: Reforming governance to reduce corruption and empower local actors.
- Data sovereignty and marine governance: Especially relevant to Christian's Red Sea interests, Iraq could lead in regional data interoperability and ecological stewardship.
- Urban and cultural revival: Reimagining Baghdad and other cities as hubs of Arab intellectual and artistic life, echoing their Abbasid legacy.

As a force for good, Iraq could become:

- A mediator between Gulf monarchies and Levantine republics.
- A bridge between Asia and the Arab world, especially through energy and logistics.
- A champion of sovereignty and pluralism in a region often fractured by sectarianism and exter-nal interference.

Over the past two decades, Iraq's security calculus has been shaped—often constrained—by the dual gravitational pulls of Iran and China. Each actor has exerted influence through distinct mo-dalities: Iran through proximity, militancy, and sectarian entanglement; China through economic leverage, strategic ambiguity, and long-term positioning. Their roles have evolved in tandem with Iraq's own struggle for sovereignty, stability, and regional relevance.

Iran: From Protector to Paradox

2003–2011: Post-invasion ascendancy

Following the U.S. invasion and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran swiftly expanded its influence. It backed Shi'a political parties, embedded itself in Iraq's security apparatus via mi-litias like Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and cultivated deep ties with clerical institu-tions in Najaf and Karbala. Tehran positioned itself as Iraq's protector against Sunni insurgency and U.S. overreach, but its patronage came at the cost of Iraqi autonomy.

2011–2017: Sectarian entrenchment and ISIS response

As U.S. troops withdrew, Iran's influence deepened. The rise of ISIS in 2014 allowed Tehran to legitimize its military presence through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which became a parallel security structure. While effective against ISIS, the PMF also entrenched sectarian divi-sions and complicated Baghdad's efforts to centralize command and control.

2018–2023: Pushback and recalibration

Mass protests in Iraq—especially in 2019—revealed public resentment toward Iranian interfer-ence. Baghdad began asserting greater independence, purging some militia leaders and seeking alternative partnerships. Iran's influence remained potent but increasingly contested, especially as Iraq sought to balance ties with Arab neighbors and Western actors.

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2024–2025: Strategic ambiguity amid regional escalation

With rising tensions between Iran, Israel, and the U.S., Iraq has tried to avoid becoming a battle-ground. Tehran's influence persists, but Baghdad now uses its relationships with Egypt, Jordan, and India to dilute Iranian leverage and present itself as a neutral mediator.

China: The Quiet Entrant with Strategic Patience

2003–2010: Minimal footprint

China's role in Iraq was limited during the early post-invasion years. It avoided entanglement in U.S.-led reconstruction and focused on watching the region's energy dynamics from afar.

2010–2020: Economic expansion

As Iraq stabilized, China ramped up its investments—especially in oil infrastructure. It became one of Iraq's largest crude oil buyers and signed long-term contracts for energy development. Un-like Iran, China avoided political entanglement, preferring a transactional approach that empha-sized infrastructure, telecom, and energy.

2020–2025: Strategic positioning and hedging

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) began to touch Iraq more directly, with interest in port de-velopment, rail corridors, and digital infrastructure. Amid U.S. sanctions on Iran, China used Iraq as a secondary conduit for energy and influence. It maintained a posture of strategic ambiguity—supporting sovereignty and stability while quietly expanding its footprint.

Iraq's Calculus: Navigating Between Fire and Fog

Iran offers immediacy—security, militias, religious legitimacy—but at the cost of sovereignty. China offers distance—capital, infrastructure, and global clout—but with opaque intentions. Iraq's challenge has been to extract benefits from both while resisting capture.

The evolution of this calculus reflects Baghdad's growing maturity: from a post-conflict client state to a sovereign actor seeking multipolar balance. Its recent overtures to India, Egypt, the EU, and Turkey are not just diversification—they are strategic counterweights to Iran's proximity and China's quiet encroachment.

For the EU and Turkey, a sensible partnership with Baghdad would require:

1. Strategic Alignment Without Overreach

The EU should engage Iraq through multilateral platforms like the East Mediterranean Gas Forum and support its regional integration efforts with Egypt and Jordan. This avoids the optics of neo-colonialism while reinforcing Iraq's sovereignty and regional agency.

2. Infrastructure and Data Sovereignty

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Turkey, with its logistical footprint and energy corridors, could co-develop infrastructure projects that link Iraq to Mediterranean and Black Sea markets. Joint ventures in rail, port, and digital in-frastructure—especially those respecting Iraq's data autonomy—would enhance trust and interop-erability.

3. Soft Power and Institutional Capacity

Both the EU and Turkey could invest in educational, cultural, and governance programs that bol-ster Iraq's institutional resilience. This includes urban planning, marine governance, and tribal coalition-building—areas where Christian's expertise could be leveraged to shape policy frame-works that are both locally grounded and globally informed.

The EU can partner with Iraq to advance economic diplomacy, mediation, and more effective non-alignment by leveraging modular, flexible engagement mechanisms and prioritizing strategic val-ue rather than maximalist posture—an approach comparable to the "mini-max" interpretation of the ladder posture globally. This means emphasizing selective depth, balancing diversified eco-nomic/trade engagement, and supporting Iraq's sovereign mediation capacities in regional and global forums, while avoiding entanglement in bloc rivalries.

Economic Diplomacy Partnerships

- The EU supports Iraq's economic diversification and stability through the Team Europe Initia-tive (TAEUFIQ), focusing on private sector development, job creation, improved access to fi-nance, and enabling investment environments.
- The Domestic Revenue Mobilisation Strategy, backed by the EU, reduces overdependence on oil revenue and modernizes financial/tax systems for resilience and transparency.
- Partnering in targeted infrastructure, green transition, and value chain projects delivers "mini-max" value: focused, high-impact collaboration without deep integration that would compromise Iraq's balanced positioning.

Mediation and non-alignment

- Capacity-building for Iraqi diplomats in conflict mediation and dialogue, as well as supporting multilateral peace processes in the region, allows Iraq to act as a bridge and honest broker—a "ladder posture" actor not tethered to any major power bloc.
- The EU promotes institutional reforms and social contract reconstruction, enabling Iraq to nego-tiate regionally on its own terms while avoiding binary alignments with either Western, Russian, or Iranian blocs.
- By supporting participatory governance and cross-cultural exchange, the EU helps foster a dip-lomatic environment where Iraq can mediate and represent diverse interests.

Mini-Max Approach: Selective Engagement

- The EU can propose modular partnerships—"mini-max" in scope—such as specific sectoral agreements (energy, digital, climate, education), which maximize impact with

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

minimum entan-glement, giving Iraq flexibility in its foreign policy and economic choices.
- Ongoing dialogue through ministerial councils and sub-committees promotes gradual reforms and trust-building, allowing effective non-alignment and agile response to changing global dy-namics.
- Supporting Iraq's role in multilateral platforms (UN, G20 observers, regional reconciliation fo-rums) strengthens its position as a mediator and neutral actor—a key principle of "mini-max lad-der posture" applied globally.

This partnership model enables Iraq to diversify its economy, play an active role in regional medi-ation/peacebuilding, and maintain flexible, sovereign foreign relations, paralleling the EU's own mini-max preference for variable engagement depth across strategic sectors.

What are the main sectors for EU-Iraq economic cooperation opportunities

The main sectors for EU-Iraq economic cooperation opportunities are agriculture, private sector development (especially SMEs), green recovery and climate-related industries, human develop-ment (education and skills), and financial sector reform[1][3][2]. These sectors intersect EU commitments to diversification, job creation, resilience, and institutional reform.

Key Sectors for Cooperation

- Agriculture and Agri-Business

The EU supports sustainable agriculture, agri-business value chains, and rural job creation, em-phasizing SME development and modernization of production and processing capacities.

- Green Economy and Climate Resilience

Cooperation focuses on green job creation, circular economy practices, climate change adapta-tion, and clean energy transition for macro-fiscal stability in Iraq.

- Private Sector Development

EU initiatives prioritize enabling environments for investment, support for SMEs, digitalization, entrepreneurship, and formalization of business activity to foster economic diversification and youth employment.

- Education, Skills, and Human Capital

Team Europe initiatives back technical and vocational training, upskilling, workforce develop-ment, and inclusive education—particularly for displaced populations and youth.

- Financial Sector Reform

EU projects with Iraq target improved access to finance, digital finance, domestic revenue mobi-lization, and overall modernization of the finance and banking sector for sustainable growth.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Supporting Areas

- Social Protection and Governance

EU engagement aims to bolster social safety nets, participatory governance, and rebuild the so-cial contract through inclusive reform and institutional capacity-building

- Infrastructure and Investment Climate

Targeted efforts strengthen infrastructure, attract investment, and improve regulatory frame-works for business operation and sustainability.

These sectors offer the strongest synergies for EU-Iraq economic cooperation, aligning European strategic ambitions for stability, diversification, and inclusive development with Iraq's emergent economic and social priorities.

10.0 THE SHIA BLOC

Indeed, the achievements of Iraq's Shia bloc remain circumscribed when measured against the broader imperatives of national cohesion and institutional renewal. While the bloc has wielded considerable influence since 2003, its capacity to reorder and unify the Iraqi state has been con-strained by internal fragmentation, competing loyalties, and the persistent shadow of external pat-ronage—particularly from Iran. In this context, Iraq's strategic posture must be recalibrated not toward absorption into an Iranian-led axis, but toward a sovereign balancing role that safeguards its autonomy and regional relevance.

Let us examine five compelling reasons why Iraq should resist integration into an Iranian bloc and instead assert itself as a stabilizing intermediary in the Gulf:

Iraq's geopolitical autonomy is foundational to a pluralistic Middle East. Subordination to an Ira-nian-led coalition would compromise Baghdad's sovereign agency, narrowing its diplomatic bandwidth and tethering its foreign policy to Tehran's strategic calculus. A balanced Iraq serves as a geopolitical buffer—diluting Iranian overreach, mitigating sectarian polarization, and anchoring a more multipolar Gulf order. With vast hydrocarbon reserves and a pivotal geographic location, Iraq is uniquely positioned to cultivate economic synergies with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Such engagement promises diversified investment, enhanced infrastructure, and access to dynamic trade corridors. Conversely, alignment with Iran risks economic isolation, sanctions entanglement, and diminished investor confidence—undermining Iraq's long-term development trajectory.

Iraq's internal stability is a linchpin for regional peace. A neutral posture enables Baghdad to me-diate disputes, de-escalate tensions, and prevent proxy entrenchment. Over-identification with Iran, however, exposes Iraq to retaliatory strikes, proxy warfare, and strategic entrapment—transforming its territory into a theatre for regional confrontation, as evidenced by recent escala-tions involving Iran-aligned militias.

Iraq's social fabric is woven from a rich mosaic of ethnicities and faiths—Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Yazidis, Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims. A foreign policy that privileges

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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sectarian alignment risks alienating non-Shia constituencies and exacerbating communal fissures. A balanced ap-proach preserves Iraq's pluralistic identity and affirms its commitment to inclusive governance.

By maintaining equidistance between Iran and its Gulf rivals, Iraq can position itself as a diplo-matic bridge—facilitating dialogue, reducing hostilities, and promoting cooperative security frameworks. This role not only enhances Iraq's international standing but also contributes to a more resilient and integrated Middle East.

Impact of the Shia Framework on Iraqs stability

The "Shia political framework" (al-Itar al-Tansiqi / Coordination Framework) is the coalition of major Shia Islamist parties and armed actors that emerged as the principal counterweight to the Sadrist Movement after 2021. It includes Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law, Hadi al-Ameri's Badr Organization, Qais al-Khazali's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Faleh al-Fayyad-led Popular Mobilization Forces Commission, and a range of smaller factions aligned with Iran. Its core functions revolve around five domains. First, it operates as a central authority in government formation, effectively acting as a kingmaker in selecting the prime minister, distributing ministries, and negotiating cab-inet shares. In the post-Sadr era, it has become the dominant intra-Shia political authority. Second, it serves as the primary interface between Iraq and Iran's security establishment, particularly the IRGC–Quds Force, mediating Iranian preferences according to internal coalition consensus. Third, through its control of significant components of the Popular Mobilization Forces, it exerts sub-stantial influence over internal security, border management, and Iraq's posture in regional crises such as those in Syria, the Israel–Hamas context, and U.S.–Iran tensions. Fourth, the Framework protects Shia political cohesion by preventing factional fragmentation of the kind seen in 2019–2020, ensuring that no Shia group's competition destabilizes the system or empowers rivals. Fi-nally, it acts as a broker of the delicate balance between state institutions and paramilitary actors, preventing either side from overwhelming the political order.

In political science terms, the Framework operates as an intervening variable, shaping how an in-dependent variable—such as the election of an Iranian-preferred prime minister—affects Iraq's governance and foreign policy outcomes. If Iran's preferred candidate were to become prime min-ister, the Framework would mediate, dilute, or redirect the effects of such an appointment. Its in-ternal constraint mechanisms are central. Major parties within the Framework possess collective veto points over security appointments, budget allocations, PMF leadership, foreign policy direc-tion, and negotiations concerning U.S. troop presence. No prime minister, even one aligned with Iran, can ignore these constraints without jeopardizing coalition cohesion. Additionally, the Framework is internally divided; longstanding rivalries among figures such as Maliki, Ameri, and Khazali impose further limits on executive autonomy, as any excessively pro-Iranian shift would provoke resistance from factions seeking to preserve their own authority.

The Framework also mediates Iran's influence rather than simply transmitting it. Its internal mechanisms balance Iranian preferences with those of the Najaf clerical establishment, particular-ly Ayatollah Sistani. It seeks to contain escalation dynamics and avoid turning Iraq into an open battlefield in U.S.–Iran confrontation, prioritizing system stability over

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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ideological alignment. Thus, even under a strongly pro-Iran prime minister, the Framework would filter Tehran's de-mands through the logic of Iraqi political survival and coalition management.

In security policy, the Framework would ensure that the PMF retains autonomy and influence, while simultaneously resisting any Iranian attempt to impose direct IRGC operational control, which would undermine domestic legitimacy. A new prime minister could push for a reduction in U.S. military presence, but only within parameters that avoid destabilizing Iraq's security balance. In economic policy, although Iran would seek deeper energy integration and sanctions bypassing, the Framework would moderate such efforts to preserve Iraq's ties to Gulf states and maintain economic equilibrium. In regional policy, an Iran-aligned prime minister would likely support Iranian positions on Syria, the Israel–Hamas conflict, and broader militia coordination, but the Framework would limit actions that risk provoking Western or Gulf retaliation.

Any Iran-leaning prime minister would also face constraints from Iraqi society and religious au-thority. The 2019 protest movement and the Sistani-aligned clergy impose substantial pressure on the government to avoid policies that appear overly subordinated to Iran. The Framework, aware of this sensitivity, would push to avoid decisions that could trigger mass protests or clerical de-nunciation.

A comparison between Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani and an Iran-heavy candidate underscores these dynamics. Sudani represents a technocratic figure moderately aligned with the Framework, able to balance relations with Iran, the U.S., and Gulf states while engaging in limited state-building ef-forts. By contrast, a more overtly Iran-aligned candidate would increase Iran's strategic depth in Iraq, but the Framework itself would prevent full subordination, emphasizing stability, coalition cohesion, and negotiated policy alignment. Such a government would adopt a more assertive pro-Iran regional posture, though not fundamentally revolutionary.

Overall, the Shia Coordination Framework functions as a gatekeeper of Shia political legitimacy, a broker between Iraqi nationalism and Iranian regional strategy, a constraint on prime-ministerial autonomy, and a stabilizer that prevents excessive polarization or sectarian escalation. Even if Iran's preferred candidate were elected prime minister, the Framework would mediate his authori-ty and shape outcomes through internal rivalries, institutional bargaining, and a pragmatic need to preserve system stability. Iran's influence would be transformed from a direct driver of policy into a negotiated product of Iraq's complex intra-Shia power structures.

The Shia Coordination Framework is the dominant coalition of Shia Islamist parties and militia-linked actors in Iraq. It controls government formation, mediates relations with Iran, shapes secu-rity governance, protects Shia political unity, and balances state–militia power. As an intervening variable, it significantly moderates the influence of any Iranian-backed prime minister. Even a strongly pro-Iran leader would face constraints from factional rivalries, institutional veto points, clerical authority, and societal pressures. As a result, Iran's influence in Iraq is filtered through the Framework's need to maintain internal cohesion and political stability.

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Shia-Sunni Relations

The Shia–Sunni rivalry in Iraq is not an immutable or purely religious phenomenon but a complex product of historical grievances, political marginalization, and state collapse. Prior to 2003, sec-tarian identities existed but were largely mediated through political loyalty, tribal affiliation, and regional networks. The U.S.-led invasion, however, dismantled the existing state apparatus, de-Baʿathified the bureaucracy, and removed the Sunni elite from positions of power, creating a pro-found political vacuum. This transformation allowed sectarian identity to be weaponized by polit-ical entrepreneurs, both domestic and foreign, turning what had been latent social differences into central axes of political and military conflict. The Shia community, historically oppressed under the Baʿathist regime, gained political ascendancy, while Sunni communities experienced disen-franchisement and political marginalization. This shift produced a cycle of competition and mis-trust, amplified by the militarization of both communities.

The rivalry evolved through several stages. Initially, Sunni insurgents targeted coalition forces and Shia civilians, while Shia militias mobilized to protect their communities and assert political influence. The bombing of the Askari Shrine in Samarra triggered widespread sectarian violence, particularly in Baghdad, leading to population displacements and the creation of sectarian en-claves. Over time, the conflict became institutionalized through the muhasasa system, which allo-cated political positions along ethno-sectarian lines. While this system provided short-term stabil-ity, it entrenched identity as the principal basis of political legitimacy, leaving little room for cross-sectarian coalition-building. The rise of the Islamic State and the mobilization of the Popu-lar Mobilization Forces further solidified sectarian divisions, as armed groups came to represent not just security interests but broader communal identities.

Despite the persistence of these divisions, the nature of the rivalry has shifted in recent years. Open sectarian warfare has largely subsided, replaced by structural inequalities and political con-testation. Intra-Shia competition, particularly between the Coordination Framework and other Shia factions, has sometimes proven more volatile than Sunni–Shia tensions, indicating that the rivalry is not simply binary but embedded within a broader network of factional politics. Sunni political elites are reintegrated into the national system, yet Sunni communities continue to experience the effects of displacement, targeted violence, and inequitable reconstruction, sustaining a latent sense of grievance. Iran's involvement further complicates the dynamics: while Tehran exerts sig-nificant influence over Shia parties, its interest in maintaining stability introduces a moderating force that constrains excessive sectarian escalation.

In this complex landscape, Baghdad occupies a uniquely pivotal role. The capital is a demographic and symbolic center where Shia and Sunni populations intersect, providing a shared civic space that could facilitate dialogue and cooperation. Its centrality in the Iraqi political system—housing the prime minister, parliament, key ministries, and security institutions—positions Baghdad as the natural site for the coordination of reconciliation initiatives. Efforts to strengthen governance, promote equitable resource distribution, and reform the security sector are most effective when anchored in Baghdad, where policies can have national impact and bridge communal divisions.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Baghdad's potential for reconciliation also extends to its role in regional diplomacy. As Iraq seeks to assert greater independence from external actors, the city has emerged as a venue for dialogue between Iran and Gulf states, suggesting that domestic reconciliation could be linked to broader regional de-escalation. Inclusive political processes in Baghdad, combined with reconstruction projects targeting Sunni-majority areas, could materially reduce historical grievances. Clerical institutions, particularly in Najaf, provide additional moral and social leverage to promote coex-istence, counter sectarian narratives, and endorse frameworks for inclusive governance.

However, Baghdad's potential is constrained by enduring challenges. Militia entrenchment, par-ticularly through the Popular Mobilization Forces, limits the ability of the state to implement dis-armament or security sector reform in a depoliticized manner. Fragmentation among Shia elites reduces the coherence of any reconciliation strategy and complicates negotiations with Sunni ac-tors. Persistent Sunni marginalization, ongoing urban reconstruction needs, and the influence of external actors create additional barriers to trust-building and long-term stability.

Ultimately, Baghdad's role in reconciliation must be understood as a process of institutional and societal transformation rather than a single political act. The city's centrality, demographic heter-ogeneity, and access to state resources position it to gradually reshape the incentives that sustain sectarian polarization. By promoting inclusive governance, equitable reconstruction, and the inte-gration of security institutions, Baghdad can transform sectarian divisions from structural fault lines into manageable political variables. Reconciliation in Iraq, therefore, depends not on erasing identity but on creating political and social structures that reduce the salience of sectarian affilia-tion, facilitate dialogue, and integrate communities into a shared national project. In doing so, Baghdad can help to mitigate the enduring legacy of the 2003 war and lay the groundwork for a more stable, inclusive Iraq.

Under a concerted effort, Baghdad could serve as the central hub linking political, security, social, and economic initiatives. Inclusive governance reforms could ensure that both Sunni and Shia communities have meaningful participation in decision-making, reducing perceptions of margin-alization. Security sector integration could create shared responsibilities between formerly sec-tarian-aligned forces, fostering trust across communal lines. Coordinated reconstruction of Sunni-majority areas would address material grievances while signaling a commitment to equity and national cohesion. Civic engagement programs could strengthen local-level dialogue, connecting tribal, religious, and municipal actors in collaborative problem-solving. Education initiatives promoting shared Iraqi history and civic identity would reinforce social cohesion alongside struc-tural reforms. The coordination of these policies would require strong leadership in Baghdad to mediate between competing Shia factions and to reassure Sunni actors of impartiality. External actors, including regional powers, could be engaged to support but not overshadow domestic rec-onciliation, creating a regional dimension to domestic stability. Religious authorities, particularly in Najaf and Sunni endowments, could endorse dialogue, providing moral legitimacy to state-led initiatives. Economic incentives, including equitable distribution of oil revenues and investment in job creation, could link reconstruction and governance to tangible benefits for all communities. Media and communications strategies could promote narratives of coexistence rather than sectari-an division, reinforcing the legitimacy of integrated policies.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Legal and judicial reforms could ensure accountability for past abuses, linking transitional justice to reconciliation without provok-ing renewed conflict. Health, education, and infrastructure projects could be designed to physical-ly and symbolically connect Sunni and Shia neighborhoods, reducing segregation. Coordination between municipal authorities and national ministries could ensure that local needs are addressed while aligning with broader reconciliation goals. Civil society organizations could act as bridges, linking grassroots perspectives to policy development at the national level. Baghdad's universities and research centers could provide data-driven assessments of intercommunal trust and monitor progress across policy domains. Peacebuilding initiatives could focus on shared public spaces and cultural heritage, linking historical identity to collective national identity.

Security and economic reforms could reinforce each other, as stable neighborhoods attract in-vestment and reduce incentives for militia dominance. A comprehensive strategy could gradually reduce sectarian salience, making political affiliation less a matter of communal survival and more of programmatic choice. Ultimately, these interlinkages would create a reinforcing cycle where political inclusion, security stability, social trust, and economic opportunity mutually sup-port one another, positioning Baghdad as both a symbol and an operational center for national rec-onciliation.

Summary

Sustained efforts toward Shia–Sunni peace and reconciliation in Iraq are likely to follow the grad-ual disarmament and integration of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias into formal state security structures, as normalization of security is a fundamental prerequisite for rebuilding trust between communities.

Preparing the ground for such reconciliation requires addressing structural inequalities that have accumulated over decades, including political marginalization, uneven access to public services, and economic disenfranchisement in Sunni-majority areas. Equitable reconstruction of infrastruc-ture, schools, and healthcare facilities not only provides tangible improvements in citizens' daily lives but also demonstrates the state's impartiality and commitment to inclusivity. Social and civ-ic initiatives, such as intercommunal dialogue forums, civic education programs, and participatory local governance councils, create structured opportunities for direct engagement between Sunni and Shia communities, fostering mutual understanding and reducing mistrust.

Political leadership in Baghdad is crucial to coordinate these efforts, ensuring that policy imple-mentation is coherent, transparent, and resilient to disruption by sectarian spoilers or competing militias. Clerical endorsement, particularly from Najaf and Sunni religious authorities, can lend moral legitimacy to the process, signaling that reconciliation aligns with broader societal and spir-itual values. Economic reforms, including equitable distribution of oil revenues, support for job creation, and targeted investment in neglected areas, provide incentives for cooperation and make reconciliation a material as well as symbolic process. Reintegration programs for former combat-ants can transform militia members into constructive participants in civilian life, linking dis-armament directly to social stability. Media and communications campaigns promoting narratives of coexistence can reinforce positive perceptions, countering entrenched sectarian rhetoric that persists at both elite and

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

popular levels. Education initiatives emphasizing shared history, civic identity, and the benefits of cross-communal cooperation can gradually shift attitudes, particularly among youth, creating a long-term foundation for national cohesion. By coordinating these securi-ty, governance, economic, and social measures, Baghdad can create mutually reinforcing process-es in which improvements in one domain strengthen progress in others, producing a virtuous cycle that consolidates peace and reduces the salience of sectarian divisions. Ultimately, the effective-ness of reconciliation will depend on sustained political will, institutional capacity, and the ability of Baghdad to mediate between competing internal and external actors while demonstrating that the benefits of peace accrue equally to all communities.

11.0 NAVIGATING IRAQ'S INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Iraq faces a complex set of domestic challenges that shape its political, social, and economic tra-jectory. Ethnic and sectarian divisions—between Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shias, and among marginalized minorities such as Turkmen and Yazidis—continue to impede national cohesion and complicate governance. Political fragmentation is pronounced, with multiple parties and coali-tions pursuing narrow sectarian or regional interests, often undermining institutional coherence and the effectiveness of state decision-making. Weak governance, bureaucratic inefficiency, and pervasive corruption further reduce public trust in the state, creating openings for non-state actors, including militias and armed factions, to assert influence. Security remains a pressing concern: the proliferation of irregular armed groups, incomplete disarmament, and porous borders limit the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and expose Iraq to both internal insurgencies and external interference. Economic dependence on oil revenues generates volatility and fuels disputes over resource allocation, particularly between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government, while high unemployment and uneven development exacerbate social grievances. Historical lega-cies of conflict, including mass displacement, sectarian violence, and human rights abuses, con-tinue to shape communal perceptions, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and complicating reconcilia-tion efforts.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, multi-dimensional strategy. Inclusive govern-ance should be institutionalized through power-sharing mechanisms that reflect Iraq's demograph-ic diversity, reducing zero-sum competition and enhancing political legitimacy. Decentralization can empower local authorities, improving service delivery and mitigating regional grievances, especially in historically marginalized areas. Economic reform is critical: diversifying beyond oil through investment in agriculture, industry, and services can stabilize revenues, expand employ-ment, and promote equitable growth. Security sector reform must integrate militias and irregular forces into formal state structures while strengthening border security, ensuring the state main-tains a credible monopoly on force. National reconciliation initiatives, including structured dia-logue, transitional justice, and community-level peacebuilding, are essential to healing historical wounds and fostering a shared civic identity. Complementary social programs, such as education initiatives emphasizing civic values, cultural pluralism, and intercommunal understanding, can gradually reduce sectarian divisions. Media campaigns can reinforce inclusive narratives and counteract sectarian rhetoric, building public support for reform. Strategic engagement with re-gional and international partners can provide technical assistance, investment, and diplomatic lev-erage

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while preserving Iraqi ownership of its domestic agenda. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should track progress, identify obstacles, and allow adaptive management of programs. Re-construction of war-damaged areas, particularly in Sunni-majority regions, signals equitable gov-ernance and demonstrates commitment to national unity. Public participation in decision-making can strengthen legitimacy and create incentives for cooperation across sectarian lines. Integrating economic, security, governance, and social initiatives in a coordinated framework ensures that improvements in one domain reinforce progress in others. Gradual disarmament of militias tied to communal factions is essential to reduce localized insecurity and increase confidence in the state. Civic and religious leaders can be mobilized to endorse reconciliation efforts, lending moral au-thority and enhancing societal buy-in. Education and vocational programs targeting youth can prevent recruitment into militias and extremist groups. Investment in infrastructure, healthcare, and public services fosters tangible benefits for all communities and demonstrates the practical value of cooperation. Effective communication of government initiatives can build trust between citizens and institutions. Empowering women and minority groups in governance and social pro-grams can broaden participation and strengthen social cohesion. Over time, these measures can transform Iraq's domestic vulnerabilities into sources of resilience, creating a stable foundation for sustainable development and inclusive governance.

The Oil Paradox

Iraq's deft use of oil and its strategic engagement with OPEC reflect a complex balancing act—one that intertwines domestic imperatives, regional diplomacy, and global market stewardship. Despite internal challenges, Baghdad has leveraged its hydrocarbon wealth not only as a fiscal lifeline but also as a diplomatic instrument and a lever of geopolitical relevance. Iraq possesses the world's fifth-largest proven oil reserves and ranks as OPEC's second-largest producer. This endowment grants it considerable weight within the global energy architecture. Iraqi oil policy is shaped by a dual imperative: maximizing revenue to fund reconstruction and public services, while maintaining credibility within OPEC+ to stabilize markets and avoid puni-tive backlash.

The Oil Ministry has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to OPEC+ production quotas, even submitting compensation plans for previous overproduction. This signals a deliberate effort to align with collective market management, reinforcing Iraq's image as a responsible stakeholder. Such compliance is not merely technical—it is a diplomatic gesture that preserves Iraq's standing among Gulf producers and global investors

Exploration and Production Strategy

Iraq's upstream strategy is marked by pragmatism. It has welcomed international oil companies (IOCs) through technical service contracts, allowing foreign expertise to boost output while re-taining state control over reserves. This model, though criticized for its limited profit-sharing, has enabled Iraq to ramp up production without ceding sovereignty.

Recent efforts to resume exports via the Iraq–Turkey pipeline and to consolidate federal oversight over Kurdish oil production reflect Baghdad's intent to unify its energy governance and optimize export flows. These moves are essential for restoring investor confidence and

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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ensuring that Iraq's oil reaches global markets efficiently. Within OPEC, Iraq often plays a mediating role—bridging the interests of high-capacity producers like Saudi Arabia and more constrained members. Its occasional overproduction, while conten-tious, is also a reflection of domestic pressures: funding salaries, stabilizing post-conflict zones, and managing regional disparities. Yet Iraq's willingness to compensate and recalibrate produc-tion demonstrates its strategic calculus: short-term deviation balanced by long-term alignment.

Moreover, Iraq's position in OPEC+ allows it to engage with both Gulf monarchies and Iran with-out being subsumed by either. Its oil diplomacy thus mirrors its broader geopolitical posture—asserting autonomy while facilitating regional dialogue.Iraq's oil strategy is neither erratic nor passive. It is a calibrated exercise in statecraft, where bar-rels translate into bargaining power, and production quotas become instruments of diplomacy. By navigating OPEC dynamics, managing exploration pragmatically, and signaling compliance amid domestic constraints, Iraq transforms its oil wealth from a mere commodity into a cornerstone of national resilience and regional influence.

Oil remains both Iraq's greatest asset and its Achilles' heel. While it accounts for over 90% of government revenue, this dependency renders the economy vulnerable to global price shocks. Cor-ruption in the oil sector erodes public trust, while disputes over revenue sharing fuel intergovern-mental discord. Moreover, environmental degradation from oil extraction threatens public health and agricultural viability.

A sustainable path forward requires:

- Transparent governance and anti-corruption measures.
- Strategic investment in public services and infrastructure.
- Economic diversification to buffer against oil volatility.
- Environmental regulation and adoption of cleaner technologies.

In sum, Iraq's future lies not in sectarian entrenchment or geopolitical subservience, but in sover-eign equilibrium—anchored in inclusive governance, economic resilience, and regional diploma-cy. By resisting absorption into an Iranian bloc and embracing its role as a mediator, Iraq can re-claim its agency and contribute meaningfully to a more stable and pluralistic Middle East.

The illustration operates through a diagnostic–prescriptive logic characteristic of policy analysis and institutional reform literature. It begins by identifying a set of structural constraints that un-dermine the stability of Iraq's oil sector. These challenges—ranging from governance deficits and federal–regional tensions to transparency shortcomings, investment barriers, security risks, and technological obsolescence—are presented as discrete causal factors that collectively shape sec-toral fragility. By isolating each challenge, the framework establishes an analytical baseline from which targeted interventions can be derived.

Each challenge is then paired with a practical solution that is framed in operational rather than aspirational terms. The proposed interventions reflect principles of evidence-based policy design: they are specific, technically grounded, and aligned with the institutional capacities of the actors involved. The logic is one of problem–solution congruence, ensuring

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that each remedy directly addresses the structural deficiency identified in the corresponding challenge. This approach mir-rors established methodologies in governance reform, where the effectiveness of policy recom-mendations depends on their precision and feasibility.

Figure

The final component of the illustration assigns responsibility to actors capable of implementing the proposed measures. These include domestic authorities with regulatory and security mandates, international partners with the capacity to provide technical assistance or political mediation, and energy companies with the expertise and capital required for technological modernization. This allocation of responsibility reflects a core principle in institutional analysis: reforms succeed only when the actors tasked with implementation possess both the authority and the incentive to act. By mapping each solution to a specific set of stakeholders, the illustration avoids the common pitfall of proposing reforms without institutional anchoring.

Taken together, the illustration's logic is a structured movement from diagnosis to prescription to implementation. It links systemic problems to feasible interventions and grounds those interven-tions in the capacities of identifiable actors. This creates a coherent policy roadmap consistent with analytical frameworks used in political economy, development studies, and energy sector governance.

Ergo, the strategic approach Iraq should adopt in managing its oil sector requires balancing eco-nomic growth, political stability, and regional influence while navigating global energy

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markets. First, Iraq should pursue a coordinated federal-regional production strategy, harmonizing out-put decisions between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government to reduce internal dis-putes and maximize export efficiency. Second, diversifying partnerships with international oil companies can attract investment and technology transfer while maintaining sovereign control over licensing and revenue-sharing terms. Third, Iraq should integrate its production planning with OPEC commitments, using quota adjustments to stabilize global prices while safeguarding domestic fiscal needs. Fourth, investing in transport and export infrastructure, including pipe-lines and port facilities, enhances market access and reduces vulnerability to regional disruptions. Fifth, the country should adopt a tiered pricing and hedging framework to protect revenues from global oil price volatility, while aligning with long-term energy transition trends to attract sustainable investments. Sixth, establishing robust regulatory and transparency mechanisms ensures investor confidence, mitigates corruption risks, and improves compliance with interna-tional standards. Seventh, strategic engagement with regional neighbors, particularly in security and transit cooperation, strengthens Iraq's bargaining position in export negotiations. Eighth, lev-eraging energy diplomacy with major consumers, including the EU, China, and the United States, can diversify markets and enhance geopolitical influence. Finally, integrating environmental and social considerations into oil sector planning supports long-term sustainability and domestic le-gitimacy, ensuring that oil wealth translates into broader economic and social development. Over-all, this multi-dimensional strategy allows Iraq to optimize production, attract investment, and consolidate its position as a stable, influential energy producer in a complex regional and global landscape.

12.0 WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES IN IRAK'S FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING SYSTEM?

Iraq faces several significant challenges in its foreign policy. Internal political fragmentation re-mains a major obstacle. The presence of diverse political factions with differing agendas compli-cates the formulation of a cohesive foreign policy. Tensions also arise between the federal gov-ernment in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which often have conflicting priorities.

The influence of neighboring countries further complicates Iraq's foreign policy landscape. Iran exerts significant influence in Iraq's political and security spheres, which can lead to tensions with other regional and international actors. Turkey's military operations in northern Iraq and its eco-nomic interests in the region add another layer of complexity. Security concerns are persistent. Ongoing threats from terrorist groups like ISIS require constant attention and resources, impacting foreign policy decisions. Ensuring secure and stable borders with neighboring countries remains a continuous challenge.

Economic dependencies also shape Iraq's foreign policy. The economy is heavily reliant on oil exports, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices and external economic pressures. Efforts to diversify the economy are ongoing but face significant hurdles. International relations demand careful navigation. Iraq must balance its relationships with major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, managing competing interests and influ-ences. Building and maintaining alliances with regional organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Union for the Mediterranean requires skilled diplomacy.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Institutional weaknesses hinder effective foreign policy-making. There is a need for stronger insti-tutions and better-trained personnel. Corruption within government institutions can undermine foreign policy initiatives and damage international credibility. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including strengthening internal political cohesion, enhancing security measures, diversifying the economy, and building robust diplomatic institutions.

The EU-Iraq Program for Reform and Strengthening Governance of Foreign Policy Making aims to enhance institutional capacity, promote good governance, and support political reforms. Strengthening the institutional framework of Iraq's foreign policy-making bodies is essential for effective and coherent policy formulation and implementation. Transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness must be fostered throughout the foreign policy-making process. Aligning foreign policy objectives with broader political reforms will help ensure stability and democratic govern-ance.

Key components of the program include capacity building and training through workshops and seminars for Iraqi diplomats and foreign policy officials, focusing on international relations, ne-gotiation skills, and diplomatic protocols. Exchange programs with EU member states will pro-vide Iraqi officials with hands-on experience in foreign policy-making.

Figure

Institutional reforms are also critical. Establishing a central coordination body will streamline foreign policy decisions between the federal government and the KRG. Implementing digital tools will enhance communication and data sharing among foreign policy institutions.

Governance and accountability must be improved through transparency initiatives and strength-ened anti-corruption frameworks within foreign policy institutions.

Regional and international cooperation will be advanced by leveraging the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) to foster closer ties and cooperation on foreign policy issues. Promoting dialogue and cooperation with neighboring countries and regional organizations such as the GCC and the Union for the Mediterranean will be essential.

To effectively address challenges in cooperation with the EU, Iraq can focus on several key areas. Stabilization and security are paramount, and the EU supports Iraq through various

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initiatives, including humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts. Economic reforms and development are also crucial, with the PCA emphasizing economic rehabilitation and sustainable green transition. Political reforms aimed at strengthening governance structures are supported by the EU through the promotion of good governance, rule of law, and human rights.

Development areas include the green transition, where Iraq is committed to fostering renewable energy and improving energy efficiency. The EU supports efforts to modernize Iraq's electricity grid and reduce gas flaring. Enhancing digital, energy, and transport networks is a priority for Iraq, and cooperation with the EU can improve regional connectivity, which is essential for eco-nomic growth and stability. The EU has provided significant financial assistance to Iraq for hu-manitarian aid, demining, and reconstruction efforts.

Cooperation with the Union for the Mediterranean, Gulf countries, and the Caucasus region offers further opportunities. Iraq can engage with the UFM on sustainable development, regional stabil-ity, and economic integration. Strengthening ties with Gulf countries can aid in trade, investment, and energy cooperation, with EU support facilitating these partnerships. Collaboration with the Caucasus region can focus on trade, energy, and cultural exchanges, enhanced by the EU's diplo-matic and economic support.

By aligning its interests with the EU's strategic goals, Iraq can effectively tackle its challenges and foster sustainable development and regional cooperation. Engagement on sustainable develop-ment, economic integration, and regional stability.

- Gulf Cooperation: EU-facilitated partnerships in trade, investment, and energy with Gulf states.
- Caucasus: Exploration of trade, energy, and cultural exchanges, supported by EU diplomat-ic and economic instruments.

By aligning its strategic interests with EU priorities, Iraq can transform its foreign policy land-scape, overcome entrenched challenges, and emerge as a proactive regional actor committed to stability, development, and multilateral cooperation.ation: EU-facilitated partnerships in trade, investment, and energy with Gulf states.

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The Foreign Policy Institute of Iraq could refine its mission to include research, strategic analysis, and public diplomacy, positioning itself as both a training academy and policy think tank. Devel-oping a clear five- to ten-year strategic plan with measurable objectives will guide its institutional growth. Expanding research capacity on topics like regional integration, energy diplomacy, and peacebuilding is essential. Recruiting domestic and international research fellows will enhance knowledge production and policy relevance. Publishing a peer-reviewed annual journal will in-crease the institute's visibility in regional and global foreign policy debates. Strengthening inter-national partnerships with top diplomatic academies will enhance learning and institutional credi-bility. Faculty and trainee exchange programs with foreign institutions will foster global expertise and collaboration. Modernizing the curriculum with modules on economic, digital, and cyber di-plomacy aligns with contemporary challenges. Incorporating simulations, crisis exercises, and blended learning improves practical diplomatic skills. Collaborating with universities and civil society will widen the scope of policy research and public engagement. Co-hosting forums and joint research projects will integrate academics and policy-makers into the diplomatic discourse. Structured career tracks and leadership programs for diplomats will professionalize the foreign service. Creating an alumni network will maintain long-term engagement and institutional knowledge transfer. Establishing a policy observatory and producing evidence-based reports will inform decision-making and enhance the country's international posture. Ensuring operational autonomy, sustainable funding, and governance oversight will secure the institute's long-term effectiveness and credibility.

Iraq–India Cooperation Framework

The foundation of Iraq's engagement with India must begin with the negotiation of comprehensive bilateral trade agreements. These should aim to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers while estab-lishing sector-specific protocols in oil and gas, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and digital technolo-gy. Given that India's energy trade with Iraq already exceeds $25 billion annually, formalizing and expanding this relationship through legal instruments will provide predictability and unlock new avenues for diversification.

Investment promotion must be institutionalized through the creation of joint investment forums and bilateral business councils. These platforms should facilitate dialogue between public and private stakeholders, identify priority sectors, and coordinate investment pipelines.

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Iraq must offer targeted incentives—such as tax exemptions, streamlined licensing, and regulatory harmoniza-tion—to attract Indian firms, particularly in infrastructure, energy, and agritech.

Infrastructure development presents a high-impact domain for collaboration. Indian companies, with their global experience in engineering and construction, should be invited to participate in rebuilding Iraq's ports, roads, and energy facilities. These projects can be co-financed through sovereign funds or multilateral institutions, with clear benchmarks for delivery and local capacity-building.

Cultural and educational exchanges must be elevated to strategic instruments of diplomacy. Aca-demic partnerships between Iraqi and Indian universities, alongside student and professional ex-change programs, can foster mutual understanding and build a reservoir of goodwill. These initia-tives should be supported by cultural centers, language programs, and joint research grants.

Technology and innovation represent a frontier of opportunity. Iraq should pursue joint ventures with Indian firms in IT, renewable energy, and digital infrastructure. Collaborative research initia-tives—particularly in climate resilience, smart agriculture, and e-governance—can position both countries as co-authors of regional innovation.

Iraq–Egypt Cooperation Framework

Trade facilitation between Iraq and Egypt must begin with the simplification of customs proce-dures and the modernization of logistics networks. Priority sectors should include agriculture, textiles, and construction materials, where both countries possess complementary strengths. Bilat-eral trade corridors should be supported by digital platforms for documentation, tracking, and dis-pute resolution.

Investment incentives must be structured around a joint investment fund targeting mutually bene-ficial projects. Egyptian firms should be encouraged to invest in Iraq's construction and energy sectors, with guarantees on repatriation of profits, legal protection, and access to local markets. These incentives must be embedded within a broader investment law reform agenda.

Tourism and cultural exchange offer a soft-power dimension to economic cooperation. Joint tour-ism initiatives can promote historical and religious sites, while cultural festivals and exhibitions can strengthen societal ties. These efforts should be coordinated through ministries of culture and tourism, with support from civil society and the private sector.

Energy cooperation must be pursued through joint exploration projects, technology transfer, and renewable energy development. Egypt's expertise in natural gas and solar energy can complement Iraq's resource base, while shared infrastructure—such as regional grids and pipeline networks—can enhance energy security and sustainability.

Capacity building and training must be prioritized in healthcare, education, and engineering. Iraq should host Egyptian experts for short-term missions, while Iraqi professionals can be trained in Egyptian institutions. Workshops, seminars, and exchange programs should be embedded within broader institutional partnerships.

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Challenges and Strategic Mitigation

Both action plans face formidable challenges. For Iraq–India, political instability and security concerns in Iraq can deter investment and complicate implementation. Regulatory hurdles and cultural differences may slow progress, while Iraq's oil dependency limits diversification. Ad-dressing these issues requires institutional reform, enhanced security protocols, and sustained dip-lomatic engagement.

For Iraq–Egypt, economic fragility in both countries, infrastructure deficiencies, and bureaucratic inefficiencies pose significant risks. Geopolitical tensions and limited resource allocation further complicate cooperation. These challenges demand strategic prioritization, transparent governance, and the mobilization of multilateral support.

Ultimately, success hinges on political will, institutional coherence, and the ability to build trust across sectors and societies. Robust frameworks for cooperation, consistent communication, and adaptive implementation mechanisms will be essential to transform these action plans from aspi-rational blueprints into engines of mutual growth and regional stability.

Iraq's foreign ministry faces challenges including limited institutional capacity, fragmented poli-cy coordination, and a shortage of trained diplomats and strategic analysts. Political influence and shifting domestic priorities often hinder long-term planning and consistent foreign policy execu-tion. The ministry struggles with insufficient research infrastructure and weak links to academic and policy institutions, limiting evidence-based decision-making. Language gaps and outdated training programs reduce the effectiveness of diplomatic engagement. External pressures from regional powers and great power competition further complicate Iraq's ability to pursue independ-ent and coherent policies. Limited international partnerships and exposure constrain professional development and global best practices. Budgetary constraints and bureaucratic rigidity restrict program expansion and innovation.

Moving forward, the ministry should invest in professional training, research capacity, and knowledge-sharing networks to strengthen institutional competence. Establishing long-term stra-tegic plans with clear objectives will improve policy consistency. Enhancing collaboration with universities, civil society, and international diplomatic academies can enrich analysis and prac-tice. Modernized curricula, simulations, and blended learning can develop practical diplomatic skills. Career development tracks and alumni networks will retain talent and institutional memory. Evidence-based policy units and observatories can inform decision-making and anticipate geopo-litical trends. Operational autonomy, sustainable funding, and strong governance structures will ensure resilience, credibility, and the ability to advance Iraq's interests internationally.

13.0 IRAQ- EU

Iraq and the Eu must intensify and deepen its relationship. On the webpage of the EU delegation, Ambassador Seiler states: "We have agreed with the Government to work together for a stable, peaceful, secure and prosperous Iraq, to boost economic reforms and to create the necessary conditions for sustainable social development. The EU's expertise in education, regional cooperation, rule of law and good governance is well-known. It is the

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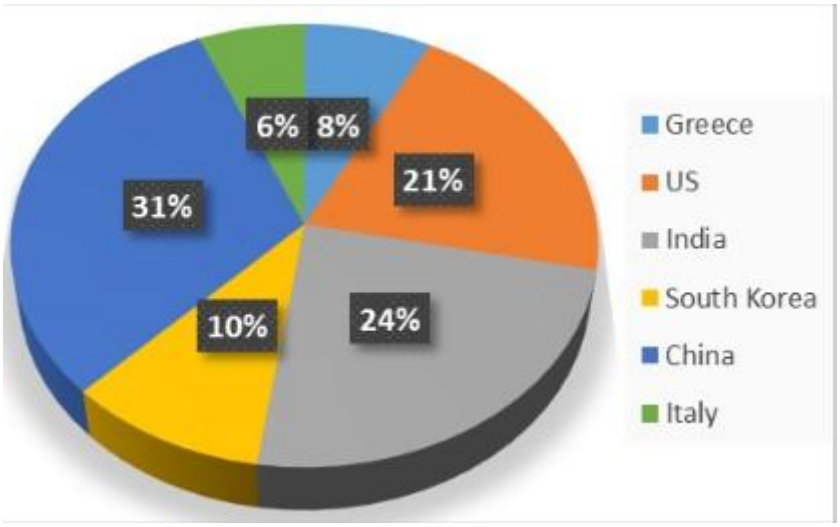
result of our history. We are ready to offer support to Iraq in these and other areas, in close cooperation and with the agreement of the competent Iraqi authorities. We will also work together on climate change adaptation and mitigation. Water is the central topic in Iraq. People-to-people contacts play an important role in any form of cooperation.” .

Figure 9 – Irak’s Export partners



Strengthening EU-Iraq Relations: Strategic Action Plan

Strengthening the European Union’s relationship with Iraq is essential not only for bilateral coop-eration but also for broader regional stability. Given Iraq’s complex post-conflict landscape, a comprehensive strategy combining political, economic, security, and social dimensions is neces-sary.

High-level political dialogue forms the foundation of EU-Iraq relations. Regular ministerial meet-ings and diplomatic exchanges provide platforms to discuss shared interests, coordinate policies, and address regional challenges. The EU can also support Iraq’s political reforms by promoting transparent governance, anti-corruption measures, and institutional accountability. By encourag-ing inclusive political processes, the EU can help strengthen Iraq’s domestic legitimacy and resili-ence.

Economic engagement is central to Iraq’s stabilization and development. Facilitating trade agree-ments, investment partnerships, and economic diversification initiatives can help reduce Iraq’s dependence on oil revenues and stimulate private sector growth. Supporting infrastructure pro-jects—particularly in energy, transport, and digital sectors—will enhance connectivity, regional integration, and sustainable development. A clear understanding of Iraq’s export partners is essen-tial to identify opportunities for targeted economic cooperation and trade expansion.

Security cooperation remains a core pillar of EU-Iraq relations. Capacity-building programs, in-cluding training, equipment provision, and intelligence sharing, can strengthen Iraqi security forc-es’ effectiveness and professionalism. The EU can also assist Iraq in developing

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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a human-rights-compliant counterterrorism strategy, ensuring that security operations adhere to international norms while effectively addressing persistent threats from militant groups.

The EU should continue providing humanitarian assistance, reconstruction support, and early re-covery funding. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of internally displaced persons and host communities. By combining humanitarian aid with infrastructure and social services support, the EU can foster resilience, facilitate the return of displaced populations, and mitigate social tensions.

Scholarship programs and academic exchanges promote knowledge sharing, student mobility, and intercultural understanding. Supporting Iraq's cultural heritage through the preservation of histor-ical sites and promotion of cultural initiatives enhances national identity, fosters societal cohe-sion, and strengthens people-to-people ties between Iraq and the EU. Assistance in healthcare strengthens Iraq's capacity to respond to pandemics, improve public health infrastructure, and expand access to medical services. Complementary support for social welfare programs can ad-dress the needs of vulnerable populations, including women, children, and the elderly, thereby promoting social stability and equitable development.

The EU can also collaborate with Iraq on refugee resettlement, integration programs, and humani-tarian assistance. Enhancing border management and combating human trafficking are additional priorities that contribute to regional stability and security while aligning with international legal frameworks for migration. Environmental sustainability is increasingly vital for Iraq's long-term stability. Cooperative efforts on water resource management and climate adaptation strategies can mitigate the impacts of water scarcity, desertification, and climate-related shocks. Such initiatives support both agricultural productivity and urban resilience.

Promoting legal and judicial reform, including the protection of human rights, strengthens Iraq's governance framework. Empowering civil society organizations and advocacy groups enhances civic participation, accountability, and the inclusiveness of political processes. The EU can also play a mediating role in regional diplomacy by engaging with organizations such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Supporting dialogue and conflict resolution mecha-nisms between Iraq and neighboring countries contributes to broader regional security and eco-nomic cooperation.

Post-ISIS Iraq has undertaken efforts to integrate Sunni tribal communities into the political pro-cess and security apparatus, particularly in Sunni-majority regions affected by conflict. Recon-struction initiatives have sought to address grievances, but significant challenges persist. Histori-cal and ongoing divisions between Sunni and Shia communities foster distrust and complicate cooperation, as Sunni tribes often perceive the Shia-led central government as marginalizing their interests. Underrepresentation of Sunni tribes in government decision-making contributes to feel-ings of exclusion and limits their political influence. Neglect of Sunni-majority regions has led to high unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and limited public services, exacerbating griev-ances and social discontent. Persistent threats from militant groups and ongoing instability hinder effective governance and the integration of Sunni areas into national political and security frame-works. Historical experiences of broken promises and unfulfilled agreements have created deep skepticism toward central authorities.

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Furthermore, Sunni tribes are heterogeneous, with internal rivalries that complicate efforts to form unified political alliances or coordinated strategies.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines political reform, tar-geted economic development, inclusive security strategies, and reconciliation initiatives aimed at building trust between communities. The EU can play a constructive role by supporting programs that facilitate dialogue, inclusive governance, and equitable development, complementing U.S. and Iraqi efforts in stabilizing the country.

OIL AND GAS

Ellen Scholl's report, Shaping Iraq's Oil and Gas Future, offers a lucid and strategic blueprint for unlocking Iraq's energy potential in a way that is both economically transformative and geopoliti-cally stabilizing. Her recommendations, while technical in nature, are underpinned by a broader vision: that Iraq's hydrocarbon wealth, if managed with foresight and institutional discipline, can serve as a cornerstone for national renewal and regional integration.

At the heart of this vision lies the imperative to improve fiscal terms and investment conditions. Iraq must cultivate a stable and predictable investment climate—one that reassures international energy firms of timely payments, transparent contracts, and regulatory consistency. This is not merely about attracting capital; it is about restoring trust in Iraq's institutional capacity to manage long-term partnerships. Revenue management, too, must be reformed. Establishing a durable, rules-based framework for export agreements—particularly between Baghdad and Erbil—can eliminate uncertainty, reduce political friction, and maximize production efficiency across federal and regional jurisdictions.

Infrastructure development is the second pillar of Scholl's analysis. Iraq must move beyond piecemeal upgrades and adopt a comprehensive framework that links upstream production to mid-stream logistics and downstream processing. This includes not only the modernization of ports and pipelines but the strategic integration of energy corridors into broader trade and transport networks. The Grand Al Faw Port, the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, and the Development Road corri-dor are not isolated assets—they must be treated as interdependent nodes in a national energy grid that is resilient, scalable, and export-oriented.

Gas resource development presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Iraq's associated gas flar-ing remains among the highest globally, representing a colossal waste of potential revenue and environmental harm. To reverse this, supportive gas pricing policies must be enacted to incentiv-ize investment in capture, processing, and distribution. But pricing alone is insufficient. Institu-tional architecture must evolve to match the ambition of the sector. This means creating a dedi-cated gas authority or reforming existing bodies to ensure coherent planning, regulatory oversight, and integration with electricity generation and industrial demand.

Political and economic stability is the sine qua non of energy sector reform. Without a resolution to the enduring tensions between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq's export landscape will remain fragmented and volatile. A federal energy compact—grounded in constitutional clarity and shared revenue mechanisms—could

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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provide the foundation for pre-dictable exports and investor confidence. Simultaneously, economic diversification must be ac-celerated. Reducing dependency on oil revenues through the development of manufacturing, agri-culture, and digital services will not only stabilize Iraq's macroeconomic environment but also mitigate resource-based conflicts and foster inclusive growth.

Strategic partnerships are essential to operationalize these reforms. Iraq must deepen its coopera-tion with international stakeholders, including Gulf neighbors, global energy firms, and multilat-eral institutions. But the most promising axis lies with Turkey and the European Union. As the EU recalibrates its energy imports in the wake of Russian disengagement—turning increasingly to the Gulf, the United States, Norway, and renewables—Iraq emerges as a latent but pivotal supplier of gaseous gas. A rapprochement with Iraq, anchored in technical cooperation, infrastructure invest-ment, and regulatory alignment, would not only diversify the EU's energy portfolio but signal a broader commitment to Mediterranean integration.

Such a partnership must be more than transactional. It should be framed within a long-term strate-gy that positions Iraq as a reliable, reform-oriented energy partner—one capable of contributing to Europe's energy security while advancing its own development goals. This would require the EU to engage not only with Iraq's oil ministry but with its broader governance ecosystem, offering technical assistance, institutional support, and political backing for reform.

In sum, Scholl's recommendations offer more than a roadmap for sectoral optimization—they outline a strategic architecture for Iraq's re-entry into the global energy order. If pursued with dis-cipline and diplomatic agility, they could transform Iraq from a fragile producer into a corner-stone of regional stability and a credible partner in the evolving Euro-Mediterranean energy land-scape.

UFM and Iraq

A strategic roadmap for Iraq's accession to the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the sign-ing of a Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement must be conceived not as a bureaucratic checklist but as a transformative diplomatic and institutional journey. It should reflect Iraq's aspi-ration to anchor itself within a cooperative Mediterranean framework, while signaling its readi-ness to embrace the principles of shared prosperity, democratic governance, and regional stability.

The initial phase must begin with assertive diplomatic outreach. Iraq should initiate high-level engagements with UfM member states, articulating its intent to join the Union not merely as a beneficiary but as a proactive contributor to its strategic vision. Bilateral meetings with key EU officials—particularly those overseeing neighborhood policy, trade, and foreign affairs—will be essential to frame Iraq's candidacy in terms of mutual benefit, geopolitical relevance, and eco-nomic complementarity. These engagements must be accompanied by a clear narrative that posi-tions Iraq as a bridge between the Levant, the Gulf, and the Mediterranean basin.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

A possible departure point for Iraq's rapprochement with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) could be for Baghdad to assume observer status in the Paris-based PEM Convention, signaling a cautious yet deliberate engagement with regional multilateral frameworks. Such a step would al-low Iraq to participate in dialogue and policy coordination without immediate obligations for full membership, providing a platform to align national priorities with broader Euro-Mediterranean initiatives. Observer status could facilitate technical cooperation in areas such as energy, infra-structure, trade, and environmental policy, while enabling Baghdad to learn from best practices in governance and regional integration. It would also offer symbolic value, demonstrating Iraq's willingness to reinsert itself into regional diplomatic networks and to explore partnerships that transcend historical sectarian and geopolitical divides. By leveraging this initial engagement stra-tegically, Baghdad could gradually build credibility and trust with Mediterranean partners, creat-ing openings for deeper collaboration that support economic diversification, reconstruction, and sustainable development.

Simultaneously, a comprehensive assessment of Iraq's political, economic, and social landscape must be undertaken to identify areas requiring alignment with UfM standards. This feasibility study should be conducted in collaboration with EU experts and regional think tanks, focusing on institutional capacity, regulatory coherence, and human development indicators. The goal is not to mask deficiencies but to transparently map reform trajectories and demonstrate Iraq's commit-ment to convergence.

The second phase must focus on capacity building and structural reform. Iraq's foreign policy in-stitutions—particularly within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—must be strengthened through targeted training programs, secondments, and technical assistance from EU counterparts. A dedi-cated task force should be established to coordinate the UfM accession process, ensuring inter-ministerial coherence and sustained political momentum.

Economic reforms must be designed to align with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Part-nership, emphasizing trade liberalization, investment facilitation, and sustainable development. These reforms should be embedded within Iraq's broader economic diversification agenda, linking UfM accession to tangible improvements in competitiveness, employment, and regional integra-tion. Social reforms must also be prioritized, with a focus on human rights, rule of law, and partic-ipatory governance. These are not merely normative requirements—they are foundational to Iraq's credibility as a Mediterranean partner.

The third phase involves formal application and negotiation. Iraq must submit a formal request for membership to the UfM Secretariat, accompanied by a strategic dossier outlining its commit-ments, reform progress, and proposed areas of cooperation. This application should be comple-mented by sustained diplomatic engagement with UfM member states to build consensus and se-cure political support.

In parallel, Iraq should initiate negotiations with the European Union to draft a Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement. This agreement must be comprehensive, covering trade, investment, political dialogue, cultural exchange, and mobility. Crucially, it should include provi-sions for technical and financial assistance to support Iraq's integration into the Euro-Mediterranean framework. The negotiation process must be inclusive, transparent, and anchored in Iraq's long-term development strategy.

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The final phase centers on implementation and integration. Once the agreement is finalized, it must be ratified by both the Iraqi Parliament and the European Parliament. This legislative en-dorsement will mark a symbolic and practical milestone in Iraq's Mediterranean reorientation. A detailed implementation plan must then be developed, outlining timelines, institutional responsi-bilities, and compliance mechanisms.

To ensure accountability and adaptive learning, a joint monitoring committee should be estab-lished, comprising representatives from Iraq and the EU. This body will oversee the implementa-tion of the agreement, resolve disputes, and recommend adjustments. Regular evaluations should be conducted to assess progress, identify bottlenecks, and recalibrate strategies as needed.

This roadmap, if pursued with discipline and vision, can reposition Iraq as a Mediterranean ac-tor—one that is not peripheral but central to the region's future. It offers a pathway to economic revitalization, diplomatic normalization, and strategic alignment with Europe's southern neigh-borhood. More importantly, it affirms Iraq's agency in shaping its own trajectory, grounded in cooperation, reform, and regional solidarity.

The Baghdad Conference

The Baghdad Conference has taken various forms in recent years as Iraq has sought to assert itself diplomatically and convene regional actors on key security, political, and economic issues. One important version was a high level summit in Baghdad involving multiple regional governments and international partners, which aimed to enhance cooperation and support Iraq's stability and development. (The Washington Institute)

On the achievement side, the conference succeeded diplomatically in bringing together leaders and foreign ministers from states with divergent interests, creating space for dialogue and signal-ling Iraq's willingness to act as a regional convenor. It also helped reinforce cooperation on issues like Arab coordination on Palestine, national security, and counter terrorism, as seen in min-isterial meetings preparing for the Arab League summit hosted in Baghdad. (Anadolu Ajansı)

These gatherings helped elevate Iraq's diplomatic profile and provided a platform for bilateral meetings between influential regional actors — for example between Egypt and Qatar — that might not otherwise occur as part of broader multilateral engagement. (annd.org)

However, the conference also had significant limitations and failures. The final declarations often steered clear of substantive resolution mechanisms for the most pressing political and secu-rity concerns, such as cross border military operations by neighbouring states, the presence and influence of armed groups, and longstanding disputes over water resources.

Critics have noted that while the summit's media coverage was strong, its socioeconomic impact was minimal, with few tangible initiatives addressing issues like the water crisis, environmental damage, or concrete economic cooperation frameworks that would directly benefit the Iraqi popu-lation.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Economically and socially, there was disappointment that the conference didn't translate high level political consensus into actionable projects or mechanisms that could meaningfully improve Iraq's internal conditions or regional interdependence.

Politically, the lack of firm commitments on critical regional disputes highlighted the gap between diplomatic rhetoric and practical policy implementation, leaving many deeper conflicts unresolved.

It could be argued that the Baghdad conference is a suitable format for discussing security futures for the region, and to take stock of the effectiveness of region-owned agendas on the organization of the Middle East. Such discussions would take as their departure point the recognition that sus-tainable stability cannot be imposed externally, but must emerge from coordinated regional frameworks that balance sovereignty, collective security, and shared economic interests. The con-ference provides a platform for assessing the implementation of previous agreements, evaluating the operational capacity of regional institutions, and identifying gaps in cooperation on issues such as counter-terrorism, border management, and maritime security. Moreover, it allows partic-ipants to consider how evolving geopolitical dynamics—including the influence of global powers, intra-regional rivalries, and transnational threats—affect the coherence and resilience of region-led initiatives. By fostering direct dialogue among states with diverse priorities, the conference encourages confidence-building measures, joint planning, and the exchange of intelligence and best practices. Importantly, it also enables the integration of civil society and policy expertise into security deliberations, ensuring that strategies are informed by both political realities and tech-nical evidence. In this sense, the Baghdad conference functions as a litmus test for the viability of regional solutions, highlighting both achievements in cooperation and persistent obstacles. Its success depends not only on symbolic participation but on the capacity of member states to trans-late commitments into actionable frameworks, sustained monitoring, and adaptive policy measures. By systematically documenting outcomes, challenges, and lessons learned, the confer-ence can evolve into a recurring forum that shapes the strategic contours of Middle Eastern securi-ty governance and informs broader regional integration efforts.

In summary, the Baghdad Conference achieved diplomatic visibility and brought diverse actors into conversation, reinforcing Iraq's role as a host and convenor. Yet it fell short of producing concrete frameworks for cooperation on structural challenges, limiting its effectiveness beyond symbolic political successes — a dynamic that reflects broader challenges in Iraq's foreign policy execution.

BLUEPRINT FOR NON-ALIGNMENT GREATNESS

What is the logic of non-alignment ? This is a foreing policy approach where states deliberately avoid formal alliances and faced by power competions or regional alignments, enabling them to pursue independent national interests, particularly through selective engagement and reduction to external coercion exerted on the Middle East for time to another. The core principles of Non-Alignment is anchored on (1) the desire for national soverignity, (2) non-interference and peaceful coexistence ,(3) mutual respect, (4) non-agression and (5) economic cooperation, avoiding ideo-logical alignment with other Western

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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or Eastern camps. The rationale is to maximize foreing poli-cy autonomy and bargaining power for small or newly independent nations or old civilizations with high hopes for the future such as India. By avoiding overt alliance politics, non-aligned states could negotiate trade, development, and security terms with multiple sides by playing you cant catch me, leveraging their neutral position during international crises or conflicts. This approach allowed such such nation to resist pressures to conform to superpower interests and safeguard the integrity of their soverignity and development paths.

To define a strategic blueprint for Iraq's resurgence as a sovereign mediator and cultural beacon, we must root it in historical gravitas, contemporary pragmatism, and a forward-looking ethos of pluralism and resilience. This blueprint—tentatively titled "The Baghdad Compact for Sovereign Mediation and Civilizational Renewal"—would comprise five interlocking pillars, each designed to restore Iraq's regional stature while anchoring it in global relevance.

I. Sovereign Mediation Architecture

Purpose: Position Iraq as a neutral convener among rival powers—Gulf monarchies, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and South Asia—without succumbing to proxy dynamics.

Elements:

- Institutionalize the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership as a recurring multilat-eral forum.
- Develop a diplomatic corps trained in conflict de-escalation, tribal diplomacy, and regional law.
- Establish a "Mesopotamian Mediation Academy" to train negotiators from fragile states, with EU and Turkish support.

II. Economic and Infrastructural Rebalancing

Purpose: Rebuild Iraq's economic autonomy through diversified partnerships and regional integra-tion.

Elements:

- Expand trilateral cooperation with Egypt and Jordan into a broader "Arab Economic Corridor," linking to India via the Gulf and to Turkey via the Levant.
- Co-develop logistics hubs and rail corridors with Turkey and the EU, ensuring interoperability and data sovereignty.
- Launch a sovereign wealth fund focused on urban renewal, green energy, and cultural heritage restoration.

III. Cultural and Urban Renaissance

Purpose: Reclaim Baghdad's legacy as a center of Arab intellectual life and pluralistic urbanism.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Elements:

- Revive historic districts as cultural and academic zones, modeled on Abbasid-era patronage.
- Partner with Brussels and Alexandria on urban planning exchanges, emphasizing squares, parks, and streetscapes as democratic spaces.
- Establish a "House of Mesopotamian Futures" to host artists, scholars, and technologists from across the region.

IV. Ecological and Marine Stewardship

Purpose: Assert Iraq's leadership in Red Sea and Gulf marine governance, linking environmental resilience to geopolitical stability.

Elements:

- Co-lead a Red Sea Ecological Compact with Egypt, Djibouti, and Saudi Arabia, focusing on data interoperability and coastal resilience.
- Develop a sovereign marine data infrastructure with EU backing, ensuring autonomy from exter-nal surveillance regimes.
- Integrate marshland restoration into national identity and regional diplomacy.

V. Pluralism and Institutional Resilience

Purpose: Embed inclusive governance as the foundation of Iraq's internal stability and external credibility.

Elements:

- Reform federal structures to empower tribal coalitions, municipalities, and minority communi-ties.
- Codify protections for religious and ethnic pluralism, drawing on comparative models from Leb-anon, Tunisia, and India.
- Launch a "Civic Pact for Mesopotamia" to engage youth, diaspora, and civil society in constitu-tional renewal.

This blueprint is not a technocratic checklist—it is a rhetorical and strategic scaffold for Iraq's re-emergence as a force for good. It invites co-authorship from regional and global actors, but insists on sovereignty, dignity, and pluralism as non-negotiable foundations.

14.0 EU-TURKEY-IRAK

The evolution of Turkish-Iraqi relations over the past two decades offers a compelling backdrop to the proposed action plan, revealing a dynamic interplay of diplomacy, economic ambition, and strategic recalibration. Since the early 2000s, Ankara's engagement with Baghdad has transitioned from cautious pragmatism to assertive partnership, shaped by shifting regional alignments, do-mestic priorities, and the imperatives of energy security and border stability.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Turkey adopted a watchful posture, wary of fragmenta-tion and the rise of Kurdish autonomy. Yet by the late 2000s, under the AKP government, eco-nomic diplomacy emerged as a central pillar of Turkish strategy. Trade volumes surged, infra-structure contracts proliferated, and Turkish firms became deeply embedded in Iraq's reconstruc-tion landscape. The establishment of bilateral mechanisms such as the Joint Economic Commis-sion and the Türkiye-Iraq Business Council institutionalized this momentum.

However, the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum marked a turning point, prompting Ankara to recalibrate its approach. While maintaining robust ties with the Kurdistan Regional Govern-ment (KRG), Turkey intensified its outreach to Baghdad, seeking to balance its dual-track diplo-macy with a more unified economic and security framework. President Erdoğan's landmark visit to Iraq in April 2024 underscored this shift, culminating in the launch of the Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETCO) and a series of memoranda aimed at deepening cooperation in transport, energy, and investment.

Today, Turkish-Iraqi relations are anchored in a shared vision of connectivity and mutual growth. Weekly flights between major cities, rising tourist flows, and expanding trade in machinery, tex-tiles, and construction materials reflect a maturing partnership. Yet challenges remain—particularly in water management, counterterrorism, and the unresolved tensions between Erbil and Baghdad—which continue to shape the contours of Turkish engagement.

This evolving relationship provides fertile ground for Iraq to leverage Turkish expertise, capital, and logistical networks as part of a broader strategy to integrate with the EU and the Caucasus. The action plan must therefore be attuned to these historical currents, aligning sectoral initiatives with the strategic trajectory of Turkish-Iraqi cooperation.

The long-term stabilization of Iraq and its integration into regional and global economic frame-works requires a multidimensional strategy that addresses political inclusion, economic revitaliza-tion, security reform, and cultural reconciliation—particularly in Sunni-majority regions and trib-al borderlands. Central to this effort is the meaningful participation of Sunni tribes in Iraq's gov-ernance structures. This entails not only symbolic representation but the institutionalization of dialogue mechanisms between tribal leaders and the central government, ensuring that grievances are acknowledged and policy decisions reflect the lived realities of these communities.

Economic development must be pursued with deliberate focus on infrastructure renewal and fi-nancial empowerment in historically marginalized Sunni regions. Rebuilding schools, hospitals, and transport networks is not merely a technical exercise but a political signal of reintegration and respect. Supporting local businesses through targeted investment and access to credit can catalyze job creation and foster a sense of ownership over Iraq's economic future.

Security reform must move beyond top-down militarization and embrace community-based pro-tection models. Training and equipping local security forces, including tribal militias, can enhance responsiveness and legitimacy. When these forces are embedded within their

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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communities and supported by the state, they become not only defenders of territory but agents of trust between the population and Baghdad.

Cultural and social programs are indispensable in healing the fractures of sectarian conflict. Initia-tives that promote intercommunal understanding—through education, media, and public events—can reweave the social fabric and counter narratives of exclusion. Reconciliation must be lived in daily interactions, not confined to elite-level summits.

In Iraq's border regions, particularly among tribes such as the Gharba near Syria, tailored inter-ventions are required. Establishing camel-borne border patrols offers a culturally resonant and terrain-appropriate solution to securing remote areas. These units, drawn from local tribes, com-bine traditional knowledge with modern mandates. Cross-border cooperation between Iraqi and Syrian tribal leaders can further stabilize frontier zones, addressing shared concerns such as smuggling, militant infiltration, and resource scarcity. Incentivizing tribal leadership to maintain peace—through financial support, development projects, and formal recognition—transforms them from passive actors into strategic partners in national cohesion.

The broader geopolitical architecture must also be engaged. The United States, European Union, and Turkey have a pivotal role to play in supporting these initiatives, not as external arbiters but as enablers of Iraqi agency. Their support should be channeled through inclusive frameworks that respect local dynamics and reinforce Iraqi sovereignty.

Parallel to these domestic efforts, Iraq's oil and gas sector presents a strategic lever for regional integration and economic transformation. As outlined in the Atlantic Council's "Shaping Iraq's Oil and Gas Future," the development of this sector hinges on a constellation of partnerships, in-frastructure upgrades, and regulatory reforms. Strengthening bilateral and multilateral agreements with Turkey and EU member states is essential to harmonize legal frameworks and facilitate pre-dictable trade flows. Regional cooperation with actors such as Qatar and the UAE, particularly through the Development Road project, can amplify Iraq's logistical reach and resource base. Infrastructure remains the backbone of energy trade. The Iraq-Turkey pipeline, linking Kirkuk to the port of Ceyhan, must be modernized to accommodate increased volumes and ensure resilience. The Development Road corridor—from Basra to Turkey—should be expanded to include oil and gas pipelines, creating a multimodal export artery to Europe. Upgrading strategic ports, notably the Grand Al Faw Port, will reduce bottlenecks and enhance Iraq's maritime competitiveness.

Economic policy must pivot toward diversification and investment attraction. Reducing depend-ence on oil revenues through sectoral diversification will stabilize Iraq's macroeconomic envi-ronment and make it more attractive to foreign investors. Clear regulations, investment incen-tives, and streamlined customs procedures—especially through digitalization—will further facili-tate trade and reduce transaction costs.

Political and security stability remains the sine qua non of energy development. Resolving ten-sions between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government is critical to ensuring uninter-rupted exports and investor confidence. Securing trade routes and infrastructure projects against sabotage and insurgency will require coordinated security strategies and

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international support. Engagement with multilateral institutions can provide Iraq with both technical expertise and dip-lomatic legitimacy. By advancing these interconnected agendas—from tribal inclusion and border stabilization to en-ergy diplomacy and economic reform—Iraq can reposition itself as a resilient, sovereign actor in the regional order. Its partnerships with the EU and Turkey, grounded in mutual interest and stra-tegic foresight, can serve not only as engines of growth but as anchors of peace.

Finally, developing oil and gas trade between Iraq, the EU, and Turkey involves addressing several strategic, infrastructural, and political factors. Drawing on insights from the Atlantic Council's report "Shaping Iraq's Oil and Gas Future," some essential steps and considerations are as follows:

Strategic partnerships and agreements form the backbone of Iraq's ambition to reposition itself as a pivotal energy and trade corridor linking the Middle East to Europe. The consolidation and ex-pansion of bilateral and multilateral agreements between Iraq, Turkey, and EU member states must be pursued with both legal precision and geopolitical foresight. These agreements should not merely facilitate smoother trade operations but also harmonize regulatory frameworks, standard-ize compliance mechanisms, and embed dispute resolution protocols that offer predictability and mutual benefit. Iraq's accession to broader regional trade platforms—such as the EU's Neigh-bourhood Policy instruments or Turkey's customs union arrangements—could further institution-alize its integration and unlock preferential access to European markets. Beyond the immediate triad of Iraq, Turkey, and the EU, regional cooperation must be deepened with Gulf actors such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, whose involvement in the Develop-ment Road project positions them as strategic enablers. Their financial clout, logistical networks, and diplomatic reach can amplify Iraq's infrastructural ambitions and provide critical redundancy in supply chains. Coordinated investment frameworks and shared governance models for transna-tional projects—particularly those involving energy corridors and digital infrastructure—can transform Iraq from a transit state into a co-author of regional connectivity.

Infrastructure development is the sine qua non of this transformation. The Iraq-Turkey pipeline, which channels oil from Kirkuk to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, must be not only maintained but reimagined for expanded capacity, enhanced security, and environmental resilience. This includes integrating smart monitoring systems, modular expansion capabilities, and contingency protocols for geopolitical disruptions. The Development Road project, envisioned as a multimodal artery linking Basra to Turkey via highway and rail, must incorporate parallel oil and gas pipelines to streamline exports to Europe. This corridor should be conceived not merely as a conduit but as a strategic spine—hosting logistics hubs, energy terminals, and digital infrastructure that anchor Iraq's role in the Eurasian trade matrix.

Port and terminal upgrades are equally critical. The Grand Al Faw Port, poised to become Iraq's maritime gateway to the Persian Gulf, must be equipped with state-of-the-art loading facilities, automated customs systems, and intermodal linkages to inland transport networks. Its operational-ization will reduce bottlenecks, enhance export capabilities, and attract global shipping lines. Complementary upgrades to inland terminals and dry ports will ensure that hinterland regions are not excluded from the benefits of maritime trade.

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Economic and trade policies must evolve in tandem with these infrastructural shifts. Iraq must aggressively court foreign investment in its oil and gas sector, offering a regulatory environment that is transparent, predictable, and investor-friendly. This includes revising investment laws, streamlining licensing procedures, and offering targeted incentives for strategic sectors. At the same time, economic diversification must be treated not as a rhetorical flourish but as a structural imperative. Reducing over-reliance on oil revenues through the development of manufacturing, agriculture, and digital services will stabilize Iraq's macroeconomic environment and broaden its export base. Trade facilitation must be pursued through the simplification of customs procedures and the re-duction of bureaucratic hurdles. Digital solutions—such as electronic documentation, blockchain-based clearance systems, and integrated trade portals—can dramatically improve efficiency, re-duce corruption, and enhance transparency. These reforms should be embedded within a broader institutional modernization agenda, linking trade facilitation to civil service reform, anti-corruption measures, and judicial independence.

Taken together, these strategic, infrastructural, and policy interventions offer Iraq a coherent pathway toward regional leadership and global relevance. The challenge lies not in conceptualiz-ing this transformation but in executing it with discipline, inclusivity, and strategic patience.

Figure 10 - Faw Port Connecting Turkey to the Persian Gulf

Source: https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/ports-logistics/is-al-faw-grand-port-inching-to-completion-in-iraq-

MSC, the Greek-Italian shipping company, is interested in operating the Faw Terminal, and KMG is welcome back in Iraq, having exited Anbar some time ago due to instability in the tribal areas due to sunni insurgency. It is Qatar and the Emirates that back-rolls the financing of the Development providing Turkey with an entry point into the Persian Gulf and the EU to the wider Asian world as alternative to IMEC and BRI.

Political and security stability remains the indispensable foundation upon which Iraq's energy ambitions must be built. Without a coherent and inclusive political framework, and without

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relia-ble security guarantees across its territory, even the most sophisticated infrastructure or invest-ment incentives will falter. At the heart of this challenge lies the unresolved tension between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—a relationship marked by intermittent cooperation, fiscal disputes, and competing claims over oil production and revenue-sharing. Addressing this internal fault line is not merely a technical necessity for predict-able exports; it is a strategic imperative for national cohesion and investor confidence.

A durable resolution must go beyond ad hoc revenue agreements and embrace a constitutional settlement that clarifies competencies, ensures equitable distribution of resources, and embeds mechanisms for joint decision-making on energy policy. This could include the establishment of a federal energy council, co-managed by Baghdad and Erbil, tasked with coordinating production quotas, export routes, and foreign partnerships. Such a body would not only reduce friction but signal to international stakeholders that Iraq is capable of managing its internal diversity through institutional innovation rather than zero-sum confrontation.

Security along trade corridors and energy infrastructure must be treated as a sovereign priority. The strategic arteries connecting Basra to Turkey, the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, and the Grand Al Faw Port are not just logistical assets—they are geopolitical lifelines. Their protection requires a layered approach: deploying specialized units trained in infrastructure security, integrating tribal and local actors into surveillance and response systems, and leveraging satellite and drone tech-nologies for real-time monitoring. Moreover, the security of these routes must be embedded with-in broader stabilization efforts, including counter-insurgency operations, border management, and community-based reconciliation programs.

International support can serve as both a catalyst and a stabilizer. Engagement with multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, and the International Energy Agency can provide Iraq with technical expertise, concessional financing, and policy benchmark-ing. Simultaneously, strategic partnerships with the EU and Turkey must be deepened through energy diplomacy, joint ventures, and coordinated infrastructure planning. These alliances should not be transactional but transformative—anchored in shared interests, long-term commitments, and mutual recognition of Iraq’s centrality to regional energy security.

12.1 An action plan for trade creation between Iraq and Eu-Turkey

Irak, Turkey and Syria are significant sources of illegal migration into the European Union, while Irak has several conflicts with Turkey. From Baghdad's perspective, the conflict with Turkey primarily revolves around sovereignty and territorial integrity. Turkey's military operations in northern Iraq, targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), are seen as violations of Iraq's sovereignty. Baghdad has shown some tolerance towards these operations due to high-level efforts to improve bilateral relations with Ankara, but the incursions remain a point of contention. From the Kurdish perspective, the conflict is more complex. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has a complicated relationship with Turkey. On one hand, they rely on economic ties, particularly oil exports through Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey's military actions against the PKK often result in civilian casualties and displacement

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within Kurdish territories. The KRG is caught between maintaining economic relations with Turkey and addressing the grievances of their population affected by the conflict.

Shared concerns within the Iraqi federal compact include:

1. 1.Sectarian Tensions: Violence and tensions between Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds continue to threaten Iraq's stability.
2. 2.Corruption and Governance: Endemic corruption and poor public service delivery are major issues.
3. 3.Security and Sovereignty: Ensuring the country's territorial integrity and addressing external threats, such as Turkish incursions.

These shared concerns highlight the need for a more inclusive and accountable political system in Iraq to address the diverse needs of its population.

As the European Union intensifies, Europe's geopolitical point of gravity will tilt towards the Middle East and Africa. This development can only comfort Turkey in its role as Europe’s gateway to the Caucasus and the Middle East and, by implication, provide a conduit to the Persian Gulf. If the European Union engages Iran swapping in diplomatic relations in return for the DDR/SSR in Iraq. For a discreet dialogue with Teheran on governance reforms, sooner or later, the development of the trading relationship with Baghdad will start moving up the political agenda in corridors of power. Teheran have already indicated that interests concerning Kurdish separatists and terrorism need to be accommodated but are widely expected to remain preeminent in Iraq for the time being.

To enhance trade, financial integration, and foreign direct investment (FDI) between Iraq and its strategic partners in the EU, Turkey, and the Caucasus, a multidimensional action plan must be pursued with precision, ambition, and institutional coherence. This plan should not only address the structural impediments to economic exchange but also cultivate the enabling conditions for sustained cooperation, innovation, and mutual prosperity.

At the core of trade development lies the imperative to negotiate and implement bilateral and multilateral agreements that dismantle tariff and non-tariff barriers, thereby facilitating smoother and more predictable trade flows. Customs cooperation must be elevated through harmonized pro-cedures and digital platforms that reduce border delays and enhance transparency. Equally vital is the modernization of trade infrastructure: Iraq must invest in its transport corridors—roads, rail-ways, and ports—while establishing trade facilitation centers at key border points to assist busi-nesses with documentation, compliance, and logistical coordination.

Financial connectivity demands a robust architecture of cross-border banking services that can support trade financing and investment flows. Regulatory harmonization across jurisdictions will be essential to mitigate transaction risks and ensure legal clarity. Joint investment funds should be established to channel capital into priority sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and technology, while venture capital initiatives must be promoted to nurture startups and catalyze innovation eco-systems.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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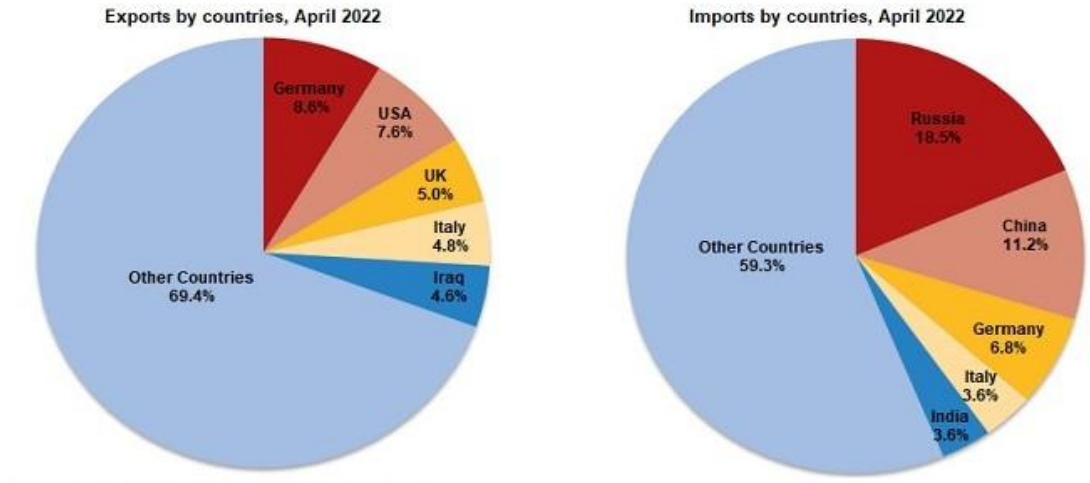
To attract FDI, Iraq must deploy a compelling suite of incentives—tax breaks, grants, and subsi-dies—targeted at high-impact sectors including energy, manufacturing, and advanced technolo-gies. The development of special economic zones (SEZs) with streamlined governance and inves-tor-friendly conditions will be instrumental. Legal frameworks must guarantee investment protec-tion and intellectual property rights, while administrative reforms should simplify business regis-tration and eliminate bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Figure 11 – Turkey's trading relationship



Sector-specific initiatives should prioritize energy and technology. In the energy domain, Iraq must pursue joint ventures in oil and gas exploration, renewable energy deployment, and infra-structure modernization. Technology transfer mechanisms should be embedded in these partner-ships to enhance efficiency and sustainability. Simultaneously, Iraq should establish innovation hubs and tech clusters that foster collaboration between domestic and international firms, support-ed by joint research and development initiatives in agriculture, healthcare, and environmental re-silience.

Capacity building is foundational. Workforce development programs must be tailored to the needs of manufacturing, IT, and logistics sectors, with educational partnerships aligning curricula to market demands. Institutional capacity must be strengthened through targeted training for gov-ernment officials on trade policy, investment promotion, and regulatory reform. Public-private partnerships should be leveraged to mobilize expertise and resources for development projects.

Cultural and social initiatives are essential to deepen trust and foster long-term engagement. Cul-tural exchange programs and business delegations can build mutual understanding and open new avenues for cooperation. Companies should be encouraged to adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices that benefit local communities, while public awareness campaigns can highlight the tangible benefits of trade and investment partnerships.

Implementation requires a dedicated steering committee composed of representatives from Iraq, the EU, Turkey, and the Caucasus, tasked with overseeing execution, ensuring accountability, and adapting strategies as needed. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

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must be embedded to track progress and recalibrate interventions. Transparent public communication will be critical to build-ing trust and securing stakeholder buy-in.

Local businesses and chambers of commerce must be integral to this process. Their engagement should begin with regular consultative meetings to solicit input and feedback, complemented by advisory committees that provide strategic guidance. Public-private partnerships and joint ven-tures should be actively facilitated to promote technology transfer and capacity building.

Business development programs—including workshops on export readiness and mentorship schemes—can empower entrepreneurs and SMEs. Access to finance must be expanded through grants, loans, and microfinance initiatives tailored to the needs of smaller enterprises. Trade mis-sions and expos should be organized to showcase Iraqi products and services abroad, while matchmaking services and online platforms can connect local firms with international partners. Policy advocacy must be institutionalized within chambers of commerce to ensure that the inter-ests of local businesses are represented in regulatory discussions. Incentive schemes should re-ward firms that contribute meaningfully to trade and investment growth, and recognition pro-grams can celebrate excellence and innovation.

Finally, effective information dissemination—through newsletters, webinars, and online re-sources—will keep businesses informed of opportunities and policy shifts. Feedback mechanisms, including surveys and town hall meetings, will ensure that the action plan remains responsive to the evolving needs of the business community. This expanded framework offers Iraq a strategic pathway to deepen its economic ties with the EU, Turkey, and the Caucasus, while empowering domestic actors to participate meaningfully in re-gional and global markets.

By actively involving local businesses and chambers of commerce, the action plan can be more effectively tailored to meet the local economy's needs and ensure broad-based support and participation and, in the process, explore the potential for leveraging the EU’s and Turkey’s combined strength to address the Iraki compact’s shared concerns.

Summary

These dynamics—spanning energy trade, sub-regional cooperation frameworks, and the strategic behavior of external powers—do not operate in isolation. Rather, they form a tightly interwoven matrix that reveals the underlying architecture of the contemporary regional system. The interplay between Iraq’s energy ambitions, its infrastructural alignments with Turkey and the Gulf, and its evolving diplomatic overtures toward the European Union exemplifies how economic imperatives are increasingly shaping geopolitical configurations.

Energy trade serves as both a driver and a mirror of regional interdependence. Iraq’s efforts to modernize its oil and gas infrastructure, negotiate export agreements, and diversify its energy partnerships reflect broader shifts in supply chain logic and market orientation. These efforts are not merely commercial—they are deeply political, influencing Iraq’s leverage in regional forums and its attractiveness as a strategic partner.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Sub-regional schemes such as the Development Road project, the Union for the Mediterranean, and various Gulf connectivity initiatives provide institutional scaffolding for these ambitions. They channel investment, standardize regulatory frameworks, and create platforms for coordinat-ed action. Iraq's potential accession to the UfM, for instance, would not only facilitate trade and investment but also embed the country within a normative framework that privileges cooperation, sustainability, and shared governance.

Meanwhile, the role of external powers—whether the EU recalibrating its energy imports, Turkey asserting its logistical centrality, or Gulf states exporting capital and influence—adds a layer of strategic complexity. These actors are not passive observers; they are shaping the rules, financing the infrastructure, and defining the terms of engagement. Their involvement transforms bilateral initiatives into regional systems, where the success of one corridor or agreement reverberates across multiple domains.

These dynamics interconnect the multiple layers of interaction that define the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamian regional system. By linking patterns observed across energy trade, subregional schemes, and the involvement of external powers, they illuminate the complex web of interde-pendencies that shape state behavior, alliances, and economic priorities. Energy flows not only drive domestic and regional economies but also serve as instruments of leverage, influencing po-litical alignments and strategic calculations. Subregional schemes, in turn, provide flexible mech-anisms for cooperation, allowing states like Iraq to balance competing influences, manage securi-ty concerns, and participate in infrastructure and trade networks that extend beyond bilateral ar-rangements. Meanwhile, the strategic engagement of external actors such as the European Union, Turkey, and China overlays additional layers of influence, creating both opportunities for collabo-ration and sources of tension. Taken together, these intertwined dynamics offer a coherent frame-work for understanding how economic imperatives, regional cooperation structures, and global strategic interests converge to shape the political, security, and economic architecture of the Gulf and its neighboring states. Taken together, these dynamics offer more than a snapshot of regional activity—they provide a coherent lens through which to understand the emerging Mediterranean and Middle Eastern order. They reveal a system in flux, where energy flows, institutional alignments, and diplomatic recali-brations are converging to produce new patterns of cooperation, competition, and strategic inter-dependence.

15.0 INTRA-GULFI COOPERATION, INVOLVEMENT OF IRAQ-IRAN AND EXTERNAL POWERS

Intra-Gulf cooperation remains a cornerstone of regional stability, driven by shared economic interests, security concerns, and historical ties among the Gulf States. Collaborative mechanisms, from energy coordination to multilateral security frameworks, aim to strengthen collective resilience against external shocks and geopolitical rivalries.

Iraq and Iran play pivotal roles in shaping subregional dynamics, with Baghdad navigating a com-plex balance between domestic priorities, sectarian and tribal realities, and external pressures. Tehran's influence across political, economic, and security spheres directly affects Iraq's strategic choices, from energy trade to border management and regional alliances.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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External powers, including the European Union, India, China, and the United States, actively shape Gulf and Mesopotamian affairs through economic engagement, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic initiatives. Their involvement introduces additional layers of opportunity and competition, influencing both intra-regional cooperation and the capacity of local actors to assert autonomy and pursue strategic objectives.

15.1 Intra-Gulfi cooperation

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been an important driver of regional development since its creation in 1981. It has provided a platform for collective economic integration, security coor-dination, and political dialogue. On the economic side, the GCC has helped reduce barriers to in-tra-regional trade through customs union measures, common market steps, and efforts toward harmonising regulations. This has fostered cross-border investment flows and raised the volume of intra-GCC commerce. The Council has also played a role in encouraging economic diversifica-tion by sharing policy frameworks, supporting large infrastructure projects, and mobilising sover-eign wealth capital into regional and global investments. Attracting foreign direct investment has been a growing success story, with the GCC recording a surge of inbound projects in sectors such as logistics, technology, and renewable energy. The Council has also provided a structure for compiling data and statistics that facilitate coordinated planning. Yet challenges remain, particu-larly around incomplete financial and labour market integration, uneven governance standards, and continued dependence on hydrocarbons.

A comprehensive development plan for the GCC would need to tackle these gaps systematically while building on existing strengths. The plan should be organised around six interlocking pillars. First, economic integration must be deepened by completing the customs union and digitalising border and regulatory procedures, creating a seamless single market that supports mobility of goods, services, and professionals. Second, financial and capital market integration should be ad-vanced through harmonised regulations, cross-listing opportunities, and a pooled regional finan-cial safety net that can mitigate shocks. Third, human capital development is essential, requiring common accreditation for education and training, mobility frameworks for skilled professionals, and stronger protections for workers across the bloc. Fourth, the knowledge economy and indus-trial diversification should be promoted by pooling R&D resources, establishing joint research hubs in AI, biotech, and renewables, and building regional industrial parks to capture value chains in advanced manufacturing, green hydrogen, and digital services. Fifth, the energy transition must be coordinated through initiatives like a GCC Green Grid that connects renewable energy genera-tion across borders, alongside joint resilience funds for water and coastal protection. Finally, gov-ernance and transparency reforms are needed to raise investor confidence, including standardised procurement rules, anti-money-laundering frameworks, and digital platforms for investors.

Such a plan would require careful governance, financing, and sequencing. A strengthened GCC Delivery Unit could be tasked with monitoring implementation through a set of headline indica-tors published quarterly. Financing would blend sovereign wealth fund capital as anchor invest-ments, multilateral lending, and private sector co-investment. Sequencing should prioritise quick wins such as a digital single window for customs, pilot

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cross-listings between exchanges, and fea-sibility studies for cross-border renewable energy projects, before scaling up to larger integration measures over the next decade.

15.2 Intra-regional trade

The evolution of intra-regional trade as a share of total trade volume is widely used by both re-gions and external observers as a key indicator of regional economic integration and cohesion. For the region itself, tracking this measure helps assess whether its economies are becoming more interdependent and building internal value chains, which supports resilience, bargaining power, and collective development strategies. For external analysts, the trend reveals how far a region has moved from being outward-oriented and dependent on external markets toward becoming a self-sustaining economic bloc, offering insight into its institutional maturity, market depth, and potential for unified policy action.

Intra-GCC Trade and FDI Development (2010–2023)

Intra-GCC Trade as a Share of Total Trade

Year	Total GCC Trade Volume (USD Trillions)	Intra-GCC Trade Volume (USD Billions)	Intra-GCC Share of Total Trade (%)
2010	1.2	90	7.5
2015	1.4	110	7.9
2020	1.6	120	7.5
2023	1.5	127	8.5

Note: Data for 2023 is based on estimates and may vary slightly.

FDI Inflows into GCC Countries

Country	FDI Inflows in 2023 (USD Billions)	Key Sectors Attracting FDI
UAE	23	Business services, IT, logistics, renewable energy
Saudi Arabia	26	Manufacturing, finance, construction
Kuwait	1.5	Finance, real estate
Qatar	2.5	Real estate, infrastructure
Oman	0.8	Tourism, manufacturing

Sources: Reuters, UNCTAD, EY Attractiveness Survey 2024.

Despite the significant trade volume, intra-GCC trade remains a modest portion of total trade, indicating that the region is not yet deeply integrated. FDI inflows are substantial, but they are predominantly directed towards specific sectors and countries, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia being the primary recipients.

Strategies to Deepen GCC Integration

To enhance regional integration, the following measures could be considered:

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1. Harmonization of Regulations and Standards

Implementing unified standards for goods, services, and investments can reduce barriers to intra-regional trade and investment.

2. Infrastructure Development

Investing in transportation and digital infrastructure to facilitate smoother movement of goods and services across borders.

3. Enhancing Financial Integration

Creating mechanisms for cross-border financial transactions and investments can increase capital flows within the region.

4. Promoting Joint Ventures and Partnerships

Encouraging businesses to form alliances can lead to shared expertise and resources, fostering innovation and economic growth.

5. Policy Coordination

Aligning economic policies, tax regimes, and investment laws can create a more predictable and attractive environment for investors.

15.3. Fit between members economic statecraft and GCC

The fit of such a plan with the economic statecraft strategies of the major GCC powers—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—is particularly important. Each of these states leverages its sover-eign wealth funds, international investments, and economic partnerships as tools of foreign policy influence as well as national development.

For the United Arab Emirates, the plan aligns closely with its strategy of positioning itself as a logistics, finance, and technology hub. Abu Dhabi's sovereign funds, including Mubadala and ADIA, have global portfolios in technology, infrastructure, and clean energy, making them natural investors in the regional industrial parks, green grid, and R&D hubs envisaged in the plan. Dubai's aviation and shipping platforms would benefit from harmonised customs procedures and cross-border supply chain integration. The UAE's national focus on AI and digital technologies dove-tails neatly with the knowledge economy pillar.

The Emirates can leverage its geoeconomic diplomacy to position itself as a central hub for trade and investment on the Arabian Peninsula. Its strategic location along key maritime routes allows it to facilitate regional logistics and connectivity, attracting both global and regional investors. By deepening economic partnerships with neighboring states, the UAE can promote joint infrastruc-ture projects, such as ports, free zones, and transport corridors, that enhance regional trade flows. Geoeconomic diplomacy enables the Emirates to use investment incentives and regulatory frame-works to attract foreign direct investment, particularly in technology, energy, and logistics sec-tors. It can also negotiate preferential

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trade agreements and economic partnerships that open mar-kets for Emirati goods and services across the Peninsula. The UAE's sovereign wealth funds and state-backed financial institutions provide leverage to co-finance regional projects, aligning eco-nomic development with diplomatic objectives. By fostering regional industrial clusters and inno-vation hubs, the Emirates can integrate neighboring economies into a broader supply chain eco-system. Participation in multilateral economic forums allows it to shape standards, regulations, and policies favorable to regional trade facilitation. Cultural and educational exchanges comple-ment economic initiatives, building trust and networks that smooth commercial engagement. Overall, the UAE's geoeconomic diplomacy functions as a strategic tool to enhance trade, attract investment, and strengthen its leadership in the economic architecture of the Arabian Peninsula.

For Qatar, the plan resonates with its long-term strategy of using capital deployment and global investments to secure influence and stability. The Qatar Investment Authority could play a pivotal role in funding renewable energy interconnectors, climate resilience projects, and joint industrial parks. Qatar's diplomatic style, which emphasises mediation and branding through education and culture, could be channelled into regional education initiatives, research hubs, and technology accelerators. By backing these regional projects, Qatar strengthens both its economic returns and its political role as a proactive regional broker.

Saudi Arabia's fit with the plan is even more decisive, given the scale of its Vision 2030 strategy. Riyadh is using economic statecraft to transform the Kingdom into a diversified hub for invest-ment, tourism, logistics, and high-tech industries. Its Public Investment Fund is one of the largest sovereign investors globally and is actively shaping industries such as renewable energy, tourism (through mega-projects like NEOM), and manufacturing. A GCC development plan centred on cross-border infrastructure, shared industrial value chains, and integrated capital markets directly complements Saudi ambitions by providing scale and regional connectivity. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has an interest in anchoring the GCC as a platform that amplifies its leadership in the Arab world. At the same time, alignment must balance Saudi dominance with meaningful participation from smaller members, which would require transparent governance of shared projects.

Taken together, the proposed plan offers synergies for all three states. For Saudi Arabia, it extends the reach of its Vision 2030 beyond national borders. For the UAE, it consolidates its role as a financial and technological connector. For Qatar, it offers opportunities to translate its sovereign investment clout into regional projects that reinforce its diplomatic influence. Yet it also raises potential frictions: disputes over ownership shares, the location of flagship projects, and the bal-ance of political influence within the GCC. Transparent rules for co-investment, fair distribution of benefits, and neutral governance structures will be essential to mitigate these tensions.

In sum, the GCC has already contributed to regional development by lowering trade barriers, facil-itating investment, and providing a platform for collective planning, but a more comprehensive plan could move the bloc decisively toward economic diversification, resilience, and shared pros-perity. If structured carefully, it would amplify the economic statecraft strategies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar while also offering smaller

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members tangible benefits. In doing so, it would shift the Gulf from a group of parallel national visions to a genuinely integrated regional power-house.

15.4 Involvement of Irak and Iran

Iraq and Iran, though historically outside the GCC framework, are natural stakeholders in the de-velopment of the Arabian Peninsula. They share borders, cultural ties, and overlapping interests in energy, trade, and security. Their involvement could broaden regional markets, enhance energy and logistics connectivity, and reduce the risks of geopolitical fragmentation.

Iraq's potential role is particularly immediate. As the second-largest oil producer in OPEC with significant gas reserves, it could work with Gulf partners on joint ventures in refining, petrochem-icals, and gas capture projects. Cross-border electricity grids already under development with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait could be scaled into a wider regional power corridor. Iraq also offers a northern gateway to Turkey, the Levant, and Europe. Integrating its infrastructure into Gulf logis-tics corridors would strengthen the Peninsula's position as a global transit hub. The proposed "Dry Canal," linking Basra to Turkey, is project Gulf sovereign funds could help finance, directly connecting Peninsula ports with European markets. Beyond energy and logistics, investment in Iraqi reconstruction—ports, airports, and housing—would stabilise the country while generating returns for Gulf partners. Educational and labour-mobility initiatives could also channel Iraq's young workforce into Gulf economies.

Iran's contribution is more conditional but potentially transformative. With some of the world's largest reserves of oil and gas, coordinated development could stabilise markets and diversify ex-port routes. Iran's geography also makes it a natural partner in connectivity: its rail and port net-works open access to Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the North–South Transport Corridor that links India, Iran, Russia, and Europe could intersect with Gulf trade hubs if conditions allow. Iran's renewable potential, particularly solar and wind along the Gulf littoral, could tie into a re-gional green grid. Its large, educated workforce and industrial base in manufacturing, pharmaceu-ticals, and IT services offer long-term opportunities for Gulf investors once sanctions and political barriers ease.

Engagement with both countries would likely begin incrementally, focusing on less politically sensitive areas such as electricity grids, environmental cooperation on water scarcity and dust storm mitigation, and transport links. Gulf sovereign wealth funds could act as anchor investors in Iraqi infrastructure and, under more permissive conditions, in Iranian industrial projects, with multilateral banks or neutral institutions helping to mitigate political risks. Regional platforms like OPEC, the Arab League, or even new GCC+ task forces could provide formal structures for cooperation without requiring full political membership.

The obstacles are serious. Saudi–Iranian rivalry, US–Iran tensions, and deep mistrust limit the scope of integration. International sanctions on Iran remain a critical barrier, while Iraq's internal instability and the influence of militias complicate external investment. Security concerns and fears of Iranian regional ambitions continue to shape Gulf hesitations.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits are considerable. Involving Iraq and Iran in the Peninsula's development would diversify trade routes and energy supplies, reducing

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dependence on chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz. It would stabilise fragile neighbours whose instabil-ity has often spilled into Gulf politics. Most importantly, it would enlarge the economic space for the Arabian Peninsula, creating the scale needed to support mega-projects in energy, industry, and infrastructure.

In the near term, deeper integration with Iraq is the more feasible pathway, particularly through power grids, logistics corridors, and reconstruction financing. Iran's participation remains condi-tional on political change, sanctions relief, and regional trust-building, but over the longer term it could become a vital partner in turning the Arabian Peninsula into a fully interconnected West Asian economic powerhouse.

15.5 The role of External Actors

The United States

The US has been the longstanding security guarantor of the Gulf, underwriting the free flow of energy and regional stability. This role creates the enabling environment for development projects to succeed. Beyond security, American firms are key in technology transfer, especially in cloud computing, aerospace, biotechnology, and defense-linked industries that Gulf economies want to localise. US universities already have branch campuses in Qatar and the UAE, shaping human cap-ital development. The risk, however, is that Gulf dependence on US security creates asymmetry in the relationship, while political frictions over human rights or regional wars can periodically strain cooperation.

U.S. basing policy in the Gulf is built around maintaining a forward military presence to deter threats, protect energy flows, and reassure regional allies. It relies on a mix of permanent bases, long-term access agreements, and rotational deployments rather than massive standing armies. Major hubs in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait support air, naval, and logistics operations across the Middle East. The policy expanded significantly after the 1991 Gulf War, when Washington sought to prevent future regional aggression. After 9/11, Gulf bases became central to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. A core objective of the basing posture is deterring Iran and limiting its ability to threaten U.S. partners or regional shipping. The presence also aims to secure the Strait of Hormuz, through which a large share of global energy supplies passes.

Forward basing allows the U.S. to respond quickly to crises without lengthy deployments from home territory. It reassures Gulf monarchies that lack sufficient military capacity to defend them-selves independently. Over time, the policy has strengthened military interoperability between U.S. forces and regional partners. However, fixed bases are increasingly vulnerable to missile and drone attacks. Iran and its regional proxies view U.S. bases as legitimate targets in a conflict. This creates constant escalation risks and increases the danger to U.S. personnel. The presence can also entangle the United States in regional disputes it does not fully control. Politically, close military cooperation with authoritarian governments carries reputational costs. Local opposition and ex-tremist groups sometimes use the U.S. presence to justify violence. Maintaining bases in the Gulf is financially expensive and ties down military resources. Critics argue this limits America's abil-ity to focus on rising challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Supporters counter that withdrawal would

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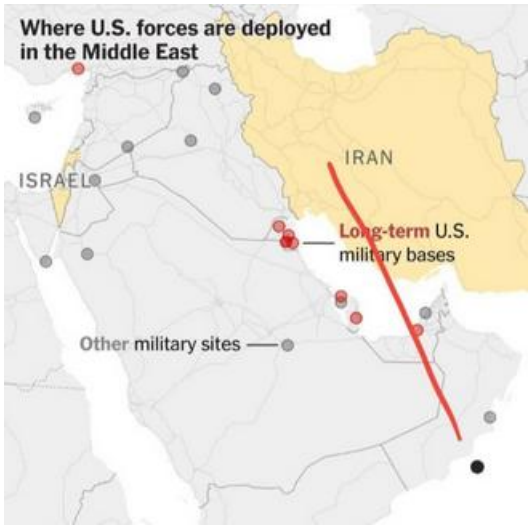
weaken deterrence and destabilize the region. Recent U.S. policy reflects a compromise between these views. Troop numbers have been reduced compared to earlier peaks. Emphasis has shifted toward airpower, naval forces, and missile defense. Rotational deployments and flexible access are favored over large permanent garrisons. The U.S. also encourages Gulf states to shoulder more responsibility for their own defense. Despite adjustments, the Gulf remains strategically important to Washington. Energy markets, regional stability, and Iran policy continue to drive U.S. engage-ment. The future of U.S. basing in the Gulf is likely to be leaner but enduring.



U.S. policy in the Middle East has evolved into a balance-of-power posture not as a result of de-liberate grand design, but as an adaptive response to repeated strategic failure. From the early Cold War onward, Washington sought to impose order on the region through preferred regimes, security guarantees, and episodic intervention. These efforts assumed that stability could be man-ufactured through alignment, institutionalization, or transformation. Yet the Middle East persis-tently resisted external ordering, producing outcomes that undermined American objectives rather than consolidating them. Over time, the accumulation of these failures narrowed the menu of via-ble strategies. Balance of power thus emerged less as a chosen doctrine than as a residual logic that survived the collapse of alternatives.

The region's structural features made this outcome likely. No state has been able to achieve legit-imate regional hegemony, and attempts to do so have provoked countervailing coalitions. Ideolog-ical divisions, sectarian cleavages, and weak state institutions have further prevented the emer-gence of a consensual security order. In this environment, U.S. efforts at collective security or liberal transformation repeatedly generated backlash. The Iranian Revolution marked a decisive turning point by destroying the pillar strategy and replacing managed stability with permanent rivalry. From that moment, U.S. policy increasingly focused on preventing dominance rather than producing peace.

The post-2003 Iraq War represented the last serious attempt to transcend balance-of-power logic in the Middle East. Its failure demonstrated the limits of coercive regime change and exposed the costs of direct control. Rather than producing a pro-American regional order, the war fractured the Iraqi state and expanded Iranian influence. The lesson absorbed in Washington was not that power was irrelevant, but that its use had to be constrained and indirect. Subsequent administrations therefore reverted to managing rivalries rather than resolving them. Balance of power became the default framework through which restraint and influence could coexist.

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In practice, this posture operates through selective alignment, strategic ambiguity, and calibrated intervention. The United States strengthens multiple regional actors while preventing any from achieving decisive superiority. Israel's qualitative military edge is preserved, but its freedom of action is diplomatically bounded. Gulf partners receive security assistance, but not unconditional guarantees. Iran is contained through sanctions and counterweights rather than full-scale war. The result is a system of managed competition in which escalation is deterred but conflict remains endemic. Stephen Walt's recent discussion of the uses and limits of balance of power usefully clarifies why this approach persists despite its evident shortcomings. Balance-of-power strategies, as Walt notes, excel at preventing worst-case outcomes rather than producing optimal ones (Walt, 2026). In the Middle East, this means blocking regional hegemony, safeguarding energy flows, and pro-tecting core allies. What balance of power cannot do is resolve civil wars, reconcile identity con-flicts, or generate political legitimacy. The United States therefore accepts chronic instability as the price of avoiding catastrophe, detrimental to overall Western interest and to its role as guaran-tor of the world economy and its status as reluctant hegemon, into which energy plays a structural role. This acceptance marks a significant retreat from earlier ambitions.

Alternatives to balance of power have been repeatedly considered and found wanting. Deep en-gagement and regional primacy proved unsustainable due to cost, resistance, and domestic fatigue. Offshore withdrawal risked power vacuums that empowered hostile actors and destabilized global markets. Collective security failed in the absence of shared norms or credible enforcement. Liber-al internationalism collapsed under the weight of local politics and nationalist backlash. As Walt argues, the rejection of these alternatives does not reflect intellectual rigidity, but strategic learn-ing.

The Middle East thus illustrates both the utility and the limits of balance-of-power politics. It of-fers a way to remain engaged without dominating and to deter without transforming. At the same time, it institutionalizes a form of permanent crisis management that offers no pathway to durable peace. U.S. policy accepts this tension because the costs of abandonment or overreach appear higher than those of endurance. Balance of power endures not because it succeeds, but because it fails less disastrously than every competing strategy. In the Middle East, that modest virtue has been enough to make it the governing logic of American statecraft. Certainly the balance of power suggest one subsumes oneself, but there are different ways of do-ing so under the American-led empire-by-integration.

The European Union and its Member States

The European Union collectively wields substantial economic and technological influence in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, though this influence is often realized unevenly across member states. When coordinated, the EU and the GCC together represent a significant bloc of financial, industrial, and diplomatic capacity, capable of shaping regional infrastructure, energy markets, and standards of governance. In practice, EU-GCC interaction occurs through a combina-tion of multilateral frameworks, such as the EU-GCC Dialogue and sector-specific agreements, alongside bilateral initiatives led by individual member states. These interactions rely on a mix of trade agreements, investment partnerships, technical cooperation, and knowledge transfer, creat-ing a web of interdependencies that enhances both economic integration and political leverage. Internally, however, coordination

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can be challenging, as member states pursue national interests in addition to the collective agenda, and bureaucratic procedures within the EU can slow joint action. Nevertheless, when harmonized, EU-GCC collaboration can present a concerted front capable of influencing standards, investment flows, and strategic priorities in the Gulf region.

Europe's footprint in the Gulf spans multiple sectors. European energy companies such as To-talEnergies, Shell, Siemens, and ENI are deeply involved in oil and gas development while in-creasingly participating in the region's emerging hydrogen and renewable energy markets. Euro-pean aerospace and aviation firms contribute to airport modernization and air traffic management. Maritime services, including port development, logistics, and shipbuilding, benefit from European engineering and technology. Universities and research institutions from across Europe foster knowledge transfer, joint research, and technical training, particularly in energy, water manage-ment, and environmental sustainability. At the same time, Europe faces competition from aggres-sive Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean investors, whose state-backed financing often acceler-ates project timelines. Political conditionalities related to human rights, governance, or labor standards can complicate partnerships, requiring careful diplomacy and long-term engagement.

To enhance the external, concerted projection of influence by the EU and the GCC, several con-crete projects could be prioritized. First, joint renewable energy parks and hydrogen production hubs could link GCC solar output to European markets. Second, integrated GCC-EU transport cor-ridors, including high-speed rail and port connectivity, would streamline trade flows. Third, mari-time security and port infrastructure modernization programs could secure strategic shipping lanes. Fourth, smart city and urban infrastructure projects could combine EU technical expertise with GCC financing. Fifth, joint research centers could focus on climate adaptation, water man-agement, and desert agriculture. Sixth, collaborative aviation and aerospace initiatives, including airport modernization and training academies, would strengthen regional connectivity. Seventh, digital infrastructure partnerships could emphasize cybersecurity, e-governance, and fintech inte-gration. Eighth, green finance mechanisms could link European investment banks with GCC sov-ereign wealth funds to fund sustainability projects. Ninth, cultural and educational exchanges could expand through scholarships, joint university programs, and innovation incubators. Tenth, health sector cooperation could encompass pandemic preparedness, medical technology transfer, and regional research consortia.

By strategically coordinating these projects, the EU and GCC can amplify their combined eco-nomic, technological, and diplomatic leverage, creating a more cohesive and credible platform for regional engagement. Such alignment would not only strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties but also enhance resilience against competing external influences while promoting shared prosperity and sustainable development across the Gulf region.

The Arabian Peninsula exhibits a mixed state of integration, shaped by shared historical, cultural, and economic linkages, yet constrained by political divergences, security challenges, and devel-opmental asymmetries. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has historically provided the prima-ry institutional framework for regional integration, promoting economic coordination, labor mo-bility, defense cooperation, and joint diplomatic initiatives. Economically, the Peninsula demon-strates strong integration in energy markets, trade flows,

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and financial linkages, particularly among the oil-exporting states, but disparities in GDP, infrastructure development, and institu-tional capacity persist, limiting the effectiveness of collective action. Social and cultural cohe-sion—rooted in shared language, religion, and tribal networks—offers a foundation for deeper cooperation, yet geopolitical rivalries and domestic political priorities can impede policy harmo-nization.

The potential for increased integration remains significant. The expansion of economic corridors, digital infrastructure, renewable energy projects, and transport networks could create a more in-terconnected Arabian Peninsula, facilitating trade, investment, and people-to-people exchange. In addition, coordinated approaches to climate resilience, water management, and food security could transform shared challenges into opportunities for collaboration. Strategically, a more inte-grated Peninsula would enhance collective bargaining power in global forums, strengthen regional security architectures, and reduce vulnerabilities to external pressures.

Yemen's putative accession to the GCC presents both opportunities and challenges for regional governance. Integrating Yemen could expand the GCC's strategic depth, increase economic diver-sification opportunities, and strengthen collective security arrangements along the southern flank of the Peninsula. However, Yemen's ongoing political instability, humanitarian crisis, and under-developed institutional capacity pose significant hurdles. Effective accession would therefore re-quire a phased, conditional approach emphasizing political stabilization, reconstruction, and insti-tutional strengthening.

To strengthen GCC governance in this context, several measures are critical. First, establishing a clear accession framework with benchmarks for political reform, security sector stabilization, and economic recovery would provide both incentives and accountability. Second, enhancing the insti-tutional capacity of GCC bodies to manage expanded membership, harmonize regulations, and coordinate policy implementation would prevent governance bottlenecks. Third, leveraging exist-ing mechanisms for conflict resolution, mediation, and joint defense planning would ensure that integration does not exacerbate security vulnerabilities. Fourth, investing in cross-border infra-structure, trade facilitation, and digital connectivity would promote Yemen's economic inclusion and stimulate regional interdependence. Finally, fostering civil society engagement and knowledge transfer from established GCC members to Yemeni institutions could support sustain-able governance practices, reinforcing legitimacy and social cohesion.

In sum, the Arabian Peninsula possesses a high potential for deeper integration, underpinned by shared cultural, economic, and strategic interests. Strengthening GCC governance, particularly in anticipation of Yemen's accession, requires a combination of institutional reinforcement, phased integration strategies, infrastructure development, and social cohesion initiatives. If effectively implemented, such measures could transform the GCC into a more cohesive, resilient, and influ-ential regional bloc, capable of advancing both domestic prosperity and collective strategic objec-tives.

Building on this, the integration of the Arabian Peninsula can be further conceptualized through a tiered framework of economic, security, and institutional cooperation. Economically, the GCC already demonstrates significant interdependence through

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coordinated oil production, labor mo-bility agreements, and shared investment in energy and infrastructure projects. Expanding this to include cross-border transport corridors, unified digital and financial networks, and joint renewa-ble energy initiatives would enhance resilience and reduce vulnerabilities to external market pres-sures. Security integration, meanwhile, remains uneven; while collective defense mechanisms exist, differences in strategic priorities and external alliances—especially in the context of Yem-en's ongoing conflict—limit operational cohesion. Strengthening these mechanisms through joint training exercises, intelligence sharing, and coordinated border management would improve re-sponsiveness to both internal and external threats.

Institutionally, the GCC faces a dual challenge: balancing national sovereignty with collective decision-making and adapting its governance structures to accommodate potential new members such as Yemen. Implementing a structured accession framework with phased reforms, clear benchmarks, and capacity-building support would allow Yemen to integrate gradually while min-imizing systemic disruptions. This could include sector-specific support in public administration, infrastructure planning, energy management, and social services, ensuring that Yemen's inclusion contributes positively to the bloc's overall stability and efficiency.

Moreover, leveraging cultural and social cohesion—through initiatives in education, vocational training, and people-to-people exchanges—can complement formal integration efforts, fostering shared identity and trust across the Peninsula. These initiatives would also help mitigate the cen-trifugal pressures of tribal fragmentation and domestic instability. In practice, a strengthened GCC would operate as a multidimensional platform, coordinating policy across economic, security, and social domains while serving as a credible interlocutor with external powers, from the EU and Turkey to China and the United States. Ultimately, a strategically integrated Arabian Peninsula, underpinned by an inclusive and adaptive GCC, would not only promote regional prosperity and stability but also enhance the bloc's capaci-ty to project influence externally, negotiate favorable economic partnerships, and respond collec-tively to emerging geopolitical and environmental challenges.

The prospects for Emirati–Saudi coordination are central to the trajectory of Gulf regional poli-tics, and Yemen represents both their deepest entanglement and their greatest point of friction. Since their joint intervention under the Arab coalition framework in 2015, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have struggled to align their strategic objectives. Saudi Arabia entered Yemen primarily to secure its southern border, restore the internationally recognised government, and block Iranian influ-ence. The United Arab Emirates, while initially sharing the goal of countering the Houthis, quick-ly developed its own set of priorities — especially cultivating influence over southern Yemeni ports, backing the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and building local security forces such as the Security Belt and the Giants Brigades. These competing priorities fractured the coalition's unity and left Yemen effectively partitioned into zones of influence.

Over time, the two powers have sought mechanisms to manage this rivalry. Saudi Arabia's spon-sorship of the Riyadh Agreement in 2019 was an attempt to reconcile the STC with the Yemeni government, thereby aligning Emirati-backed forces within a broader Saudi-led framework. Im-plementation has been uneven, and mutual suspicions persist. For deeper

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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coordination to material-ise, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would need to clarify their long-term endgames in Yemen — whether they support a unified state, a federal structure, or an informal division of influence. Coordination could be strengthened through joint oversight councils, shared funding mechanisms for recon-struction, and a clear sequencing of political and security milestones under UN auspices. Other-wise, their rivalry risks perpetuating Yemen's fragmentation and creating vacuums exploitable by Iran-aligned and jihadist groups.

Beyond Yemen, similar coordination challenges recur. On Palestine, the UAE's normalisation with Israel under the Abraham Accords has diverged from Saudi Arabia's more gradual and condi-tional approach. Abu Dhabi has pursued a transactional, economy-driven strategy, while Riyadh has tied recognition to progress on Palestinian statehood. This divergence complicates collective Gulf leverage and has introduced quiet competition for influence in East Jerusalem and the Pales-tinian Authority's financial networks. Saudi–Emirati convergence would require either a Saudi decision to follow suit with recognition — still politically sensitive in the Kingdom — or a UAE willingness to align its initiatives more closely with Arab League frameworks led by Riyadh.

In Syria, Abu Dhabi has spearheaded the push for Arab normalisation with Bashar al-Assad, re-opening its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and lobbying for Syria's readmission to the Arab League in 2023. Saudi Arabia initially resisted, preferring to isolate the regime, but eventually shifted towards engagement to counterbalance Iranian and Turkish sway. This has reduced but not eliminated the gap between the two; the UAE's eagerness to invest in Syria's reconstruction con-trasts with Saudi caution, which remains tied to conditionality on Iranian withdrawal and political reforms. Closer coordination would require shared red lines on Iranian military entrenchment and a unified Gulf economic framework for Syria's recovery to avoid competitive, piecemeal en-gagement.

There are other low-grade but persistent irritants in their relationship: differences over relations with Qatar post-blockade, competition in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea corridor, and diverging economic models — Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 emphasises centralised mega-projects, while the UAE pursues a decentralised, outward-oriented hub strategy. These structural divergences can translate into tactical frictions when the two vie for investment, logistics control, or strategic in-fluence.

Yet despite these tensions, Emirati–Saudi coordination remains more likely than not, because their strategic interests are deeply interdependent: both seek to contain Iran, stabilise their periph-eries, and maintain the Gulf's security architecture. They share deep institutional ties through the GCC, joint military exercises, and personal ties between ruling families. Coordination could be institutionalised through a Saudi–Emirati Strategic Council empowered to harmonise policies in conflict theatres, manage competition in third regions, and pool investments for reconstruction and stabilisation. A joint strategic roadmap for Yemen, Palestine, and Syria — with agreed roles, benchmarks, and financial commitments — would be essential to converting their uneasy parallel-ism into genuine alignment.

Trade in non-energy products between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council has expanded steadily, reflecting a diversification of Gulf economies and a growing shift in

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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European commercial engagement beyond hydrocarbons. While energy still dominates GCC exports to the EU, non-energy trade has become increasingly significant on both sides, especially in manufac-tured goods, high-value services, and knowledge-intensive sectors. This evolving pattern marks a structural shift in the economic relationship between the two blocs.

The EU's main exports to the Gulf are overwhelmingly non-energy. They include machinery, transport equipment, industrial goods, aircraft, turbines, and electrical systems, which account for nearly half of EU exports to the region, with Germany, France, and Italy as major players. Phar-maceuticals and medical technologies are another core pillar, supporting rapidly expanding Gulf healthcare systems. High-end consumer products and luxury goods—fashion, food and beverages, furniture—tap into the region's high purchasing power. In recent years, green technologies and digital services have begun to emerge as dynamic new areas, including renewable energy compo-nents, smart grids, cybersecurity platforms, and e-government systems.

On the Gulf side, non-energy exports to Europe remain smaller but are growing. Petrochemicals, plastics, and fertilizers form the backbone of industrial exports. Aluminium and other metals are increasingly important, especially from the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar. New manufacturing indus-tries are slowly emerging, from automotive assembly in Saudi Arabia to aerospace components in the UAE. Tourism, logistics, and investment flows represent the fastest-growing intangible ser-vice exports from the Gulf to Europe, creating an increasingly complex web of economic interde-pendencies.

Table Non-Energy Trade Between EU and the GCC

Sector	Current Status (2020s)	Projected Trajectory (2035)
Machinery & Industrial Goods	Largest EU export category to GCC; dominated by Germany, France, Italy	Remains core; localized production and joint ventures in Gulf industrial zones
Pharmaceuticals & Health Tech	High-value EU exports to GCC healthcare systems	Expanding with joint R&D hubs and biotech parks
Luxury & Consumer Products	Niche but high-margin EU exports	Steady growth driven by Gulf retail hubs and tourism
Digital Services & ICT	Emerging field, especially in UAE and Saudi Arabia	Rapid growth: AI, fintech, cybersecurity, cloud services
Green Tech & Renewables	Nascent but fast-growing	Major growth driver: hydrogen, solar, CCS, energy storage
Petrochemicals & Plastics (GCC→EU)	Mature sector, large GCC exports	Diversified into higher-value chemical products
Metals & Aluminium (GCC→EU)	Significant exports from UAE, Bahrain, Qatar	Higher-value processed goods, sustainable aluminium
Agri-Food & Food Tech	Modest, mostly EU→GCC	Growth in food processing, logistics, agricultural technology
Services (Tourism, Logistics, Finance)	Growing Gulf role in Europe and vice versa	Integrated hubs for tourism, education, logistics, financial services

Looking forward, the Gulf's ambitious economic diversification strategies—such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071, and Qatar National Vision 2030—will generate sustained demand for European expertise, high-tech goods, and cultural and educational

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services. This includes smart manufacturing systems, urban infrastructure, transport, digital platforms, cultural industries, and health technologies. If concluded, the long-stalled EU–GCC Free Trade Agreement could dramati-cally lower tariffs and regulatory barriers for non-energy goods and services, giving EU firms a competitive edge over Asian rivals and boosting Gulf exports beyond oil-related products.

The EU–GCC green transition partnership reflects a growing convergence between Europe's de-carbonisation agenda and the Gulf's drive for economic diversification. The EU seeks resilient, low-carbon industrial value chains to meet climate targets and maintain competitiveness.GCC states, meanwhile, view renewable energy and green manufacturing as strategic pathways beyond hydrocarbons. This alignment creates strong potential for cooperation in renewable energy, green hydrogen, sustainable fuels, and low-carbon industrial inputs. Joint value chains can enhance en-ergy security, industrial resilience, and climate diplomacy for both regions.The Gulf's advantages in capital availability, solar resources, and scale complement Europe's technological leadership and regulatory expertise.

Green industrial value chains are likely to become a central pillar of this evolving trade relation-ship. Gulf countries are positioning themselves to export green hydrogen, ammonia, and related derivatives, while importing European electrolysers, renewable energy systems, battery technolo-gies, and carbon capture solutions. This will increasingly count as non-energy industrial trade and will anchor EU-GCC supply chain interdependence. Digital trade and e-commerce will form an-other critical bridge, with GCC states investing in AI, cloud computing, fintech, and smart gov-ernment systems while European firms, especially from the Nordics, Germany, and France, offer advanced solutions in digital governance, cybersecurity, and fintech infrastructure. Food security concerns are also drawing the Gulf toward partnerships with the EU in food production, agricul-tural technology, and cold-chain logistics.

The Gulf's advantages in capital availability, solar resources, and scale complement Europe's technological leadership and regulatory expertise. However, regulatory asymmetries pose signifi-cant challenges, particularly regarding EU climate instruments such as the Carbon Border Ad-justment Mechanism. Without alignment on standards and carbon accounting, Gulf exports risk facing higher costs and reduced market access. Financing large-scale green projects also remains complex due to high capital requirements and investment risks. Differences in governance models and policy priorities further complicate coordination between the two regions. Market uncertainty around hydrogen demand, infrastructure, and long-term off take agreements adds another layer of risk. Despite these obstacles, structured cooperation offers a pathway to transform challenges into incentives for decarbonisation. Aligning standards, certification schemes, and sustainability met-rics is essential to facilitate trade and investment. Blended finance mechanisms and public-private partnerships can help mobilise capital and reduce risk. Ultimately, a long-term, institutionalised EU–GCC green partnership can turn shared climate ambitions into durable economic and geopo-litical gains.

Trade promotion can be systematically assessed through a set of key performance indicators that capture both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of trade expansion across sectors. At the most fundamental level, trade volume and value indicators provide insight into the effectiveness of promotion strategies. Metrics such as year-on-year growth in exports, the

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share of domestic production replacing imports, sectoral trade balances, and the average transaction value are essen-tial to understand not only the scale but also the quality of trade engagements. These indicators reveal whether trade promotion policies are merely increasing transactional volumes or whether they are fostering higher-value, strategically significant exchanges.

Market diversification and penetration metrics are equally critical. Tracking the number of new export markets entered, sectoral export shares in target markets, and the concentration of exports across products and destinations allows policymakers to gauge the resilience and sustainability of trade portfolios. A highly concentrated export structure signals vulnerability, whereas diversified penetration indicates successful positioning within the global market.

Investment and partnership metrics complement trade volume analysis by reflecting the capacity of trade promotion to attract foreign direct investment and strategic collaborations. Indicators such as sector-specific FDI inflows, the number and value of public-private trade initiatives, and the formation of joint ventures provide evidence of the leverage created by trade promotion ef-forts in fostering long-term commercial and technological linkages.

The policy and regulatory environment constitute another dimension of performance assessment. Indicators that capture the time required for products to comply with foreign regulatory standards, reductions in non-tariff barriers, and the implementation of sector-specific trade facilitation measures allow for an evaluation of the structural effectiveness of trade promotion instruments. This dimension is particularly relevant for sectors such as energy, where regulatory compliance and standardization are critical to accessing international markets.

Sector-specific performance measures are especially important in areas with strategic signifi-cance, such as energy and advanced technologies. Metrics in this context include the volume and value of energy exports, growth in renewable energy trade, the number of technology transfer agreements, and compliance with energy efficiency and emissions standards. These indicators not only track trade flows but also the alignment of sectoral exports with broader policy objectives, including sustainability and technological modernization.

Trade promotion effectiveness can also be gauged by its impact on small and medium-sized en-terprises. Metrics such as the number of SMEs participating in trade missions, the revenue gener-ated from SME exports, and the rate of innovation adoption within exported products illuminate the capacity-building dimension of trade promotion. They demonstrate how policy interventions translate into enhanced competitiveness and entrepreneurial engagement in international markets.

Finally, trade promotion performance can be assessed in terms of visibility and broader economic impact. Indicators such as participation in international trade missions, the quality and quantity of leads generated, media coverage, job creation, contribution to gross domestic product, and the value added per exported unit capture the extent to which trade promotion translates into tangible economic outcomes. Collectively, these indicators provide a multidimensional framework for evaluating the effectiveness of trade promotion policies and

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for identifying strategic areas where interventions can maximize economic, technological, and geopolitical benefits.

Table KPIs EU –GCC Trade

Sector	KPI	Measurement Method	Target (EU → GCC)	Target (GCC → EU)	Strategic Interpretation
Energy	Export volume and value	Trade statistics, customs data, energy trade reports	Increase EU energy exports (renewables, gas technology) by 15% annually	Ensure stable GCC energy exports (oil, gas) with at least 5% annual increase in advanced energy technologies	Enhances energy interdependence; supports EU renewable agenda while leveraging GCC hydrocarbon exports
	Renewable energy trade growth	Project approvals, signed contracts, technology transfers	Double EU renewable tech exports to GCC over 5 years	Introduce GCC renewable exports into EU markets, targeting 10% growth in solar and wind tech	Promotes sustainable energy transition and industrial cooperation
	Technology transfer agreements	Number of formalized MoUs or JV agreements	Sign at least 3 sectoral technology agreements per year	Facilitate at least 2 GCC-led joint ventures in energy R&D	Encourages knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and innovation alignment
Industrial	Trade volume and value	Sectoral trade reports, customs data	Increase EU industrial exports (machinery, transport, chemicals) by 10%	GCC industrial goods exports to EU increase by 5–7%	Supports EU industrial competitiveness and GCC diversification goals
	Market diversification	Number of new GCC markets entered, export share concentration index	Enter at least 2 new GCC markets annually	GCC penetration of EU markets to grow by 5% in underrepresented sectors	Reduces dependency on traditional markets, spreads risk, and increases resilience
	Public-private trade projects	Project pipeline value and implementation status	Launch €500M+ EU-GCC collaborative industrial projects over 3 years	Facilitate GCC co-investment in EU industrial projects worth €200M+	Strengthens institutional collaboration and long-term economic linkages
Technology	Export revenue and innovation adoption	Trade value, patents, tech transfer statistics	Achieve 12% annual growth in EU ICT and tech exports to GCC	GCC export of tech-enabled services to EU grows by 5%	Enhances competitiveness, promotes high-value exports, and drives digital transformation
	FDI attracted per sector	Investment inflows tracked	€1B+ FDI inflow into	€500M+ EU investment in	Indicates trust and long-term strategic

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		by ministries and investment boards	EU tech sectors from GCC over 5 years	GCC tech startups	commitment; fosters cross-border R&D
	SME participation	Number of SMEs in trade missions and innovation programs	50 SMEs participating in GCC-targeted trade initiatives annually	20 GCC SMEs participate in EU trade programs	Builds capacity at microeconomic level, supports entrepreneurship
Services	Trade volume and value	Sectoral export/import data	Increase EU professional and financial services exports to GCC by 8% annually	GCC service exports to EU grow by 3–5%	Supports knowledge economy linkages and financial integration
	International leads and visibility	Trade mission leads, marketing analytics	Generate 200+ high-quality leads per sector annually	Facilitate 50+ GCC service provider leads into EU markets	Measures soft power, network effect, and market intelligence
	Jobs created & value added	Employment statistics, sectoral GDP contribution	5,000+ EU jobs linked to GCC trade annually	1,000+ GCC jobs linked to EU trade annually	Captures socioeconomic impact and strengthens political-economic ties

The strategic orientation of the EU → GCC trade targets is directed primarily toward the export of high-value technologies, industrial goods, and renewable energy solutions. This focus is closely aligned with the broader objectives of the European industrial strategy, including the promotion of innovation, technological leadership, and the green transition. By emphasizing sectors with high value-added potential, the EU aims to consolidate its competitive position in strategically im-portant markets within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Conversely, the GCC → EU targets are structured to secure reliable energy imports, facilitate joint ventures, and progressively introduce GCC industrial and technology exports into European markets. These objectives support the diversification agendas of GCC economies, while simulta-neously contributing to a more balanced and reciprocal trade relationship with the European Un-ion.

The cross-sectoral key performance indicators adopted in this framework capture both quantita-tive and qualitative dimensions of trade promotion. Quantitative measures, including trade vol-ume, trade value, and foreign direct investment, are complemented by qualitative indicators such as technology transfer, market diversification, and SME capacity-building initiatives. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive assessment of trade promotion effectiveness, encompassing both economic outcomes and structural improvements in trade resilience and market integration.

Finally, the framework is designed to support scenario-based analysis and strategic planning. By incorporating projections of trade missions, regulatory harmonization, and bilateral

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agreements, policymakers can model the potential impact of interventions on key performance indicators over a medium-term horizon of three to five years. This approach facilitates evidence-based decision-making and the identification of priority areas for policy intervention and investment.

As a result, the share of non-energy goods in total EU–GCC trade is expected to rise from roughly one-third today to well over half by the mid-2030s. This future trade structure will be more inno-vation- and services-driven, embedding long-term European commercial presence through joint ventures, R&D collaboration, and skill networks rather than commodity flows. Gulf sovereign wealth funds are already investing heavily in European non-energy sectors such as logistics, re-newable industries, sports, and technology, while European firms are localising manufacturing and service operations within the Gulf. These developments will create cross-regional industrial ecosystems and lay the foundation for a more balanced, resilient, and strategically autonomous EU–GCC economic partnership, less vulnerable to oil price fluctuations or energy geopolitics. They also position the two blocs to project joint influence into Africa and South Asia via shared production and logistics chains.

India

India's expanding role in the Gulf region is anchored not only in energy trade and labour mobility but also in rapidly growing patterns of trade, investment, and technological collaboration that are reshaping the region's economic geography. The Gulf states are among India's largest trading partners: the UAE has consistently ranked as India's third-largest trading partner, and Saudi Ara-bia is among the top five, with bilateral trade volumes surpassing $50 billion annually in recent years. Indian companies are increasingly investing in Gulf special economic zones, logistics hubs, and industrial parks, while Gulf sovereign wealth funds—such as ADIA, Mubadala, PIF, and QIA—are steadily expanding their FDI footprint in India's infrastructure, renewable energy, digi-tal technology, and retail sectors. This bidirectional flow of capital and goods reinforces a dense network of supply chains spanning the Arabian Sea.

Geography strongly favours the deepening of these ties. The Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent are separated by only a few days' shipping across the Arabian Sea, and chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb form part of India's wider strategic maritime envelope. This geographical contiguity allows just-in-time supply chains, streamlined port logis-tics, and energy flows that are less vulnerable to disruptions than longer Asian routes. India's western ports—particularly Mumbai, Mundra, and Kochi—are increasingly oriented toward Gulf-bound trade, while Gulf mega-ports like Jebel Ali, Khalifa Port, Duqm, and Dammam are posi-tioning themselves as transshipment nodes linking India to Europe and Africa. The planned India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the 2023 G20, formalises this ge-ography into a connective corridor linking Indian manufacturing hubs with Gulf logistics zones and European consumer markets, using integrated rail and maritime infrastructure. If realised, this corridor could reduce freight transit times between India and Europe by up to 40 percent.

FDI potential is expanding in several strategic sectors. Gulf sovereign funds are already among the largest foreign investors in Indian renewable energy—backing large-scale solar

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and green hydro-gen projects in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Indian firms, in turn, are building IT service centres, fintech platforms, and healthcare facilities in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, taking advantage of free zones and innovation districts. India's leadership in digital public infrastructure (DPI)—such as the Aadhaar identity system and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI)—is being adapted in Gulf digital governance frameworks, creating scope for cross-border financial integration and digital trade. Joint ventures in food processing and cold-chain logistics are also emerging as India seeks to secure Gulf food markets, while Gulf states hedge against global food supply shocks by invest-ing in Indian agritech and farmland projects. These complement existing energy ties, where India remains one of the largest buyers of Gulf oil and LNG while increasingly importing petrochemi-cals and fertilisers.

Strategically, India's blue-water navy and growing maritime domain awareness capabilities allow it to project stability across the Indian Ocean, a region that directly envelops the Gulf. Gulf capi-tals increasingly see India as a partner in maritime security, counterpiracy operations, and critical sea-lane protection, particularly as questions grow about the long-term durability of U.S. security commitments. Indian naval deployments to Oman's Duqm port, its bilateral logistics agreements with the UAE and Oman, and its exercises with the French and U.S. navies in the Western Indian Ocean have underscored its capacity to act as a regional security contributor. This makes India a natural balancing presence against other external actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey, which are seeking strategic footholds in Gulf maritime zones.

In IR theory, corporate security—when transposed from firms to the naval domain—can be de-fined as a hybrid form of security governance in which state navies, quasi-state agencies, and private corporate actors jointly protect the continuity of maritime economic systems rather than territorial sovereignty per se.

Applied to the naval domain, corporate security refers to the protection of sea-based value chains—shipping lanes, offshore energy, ports, undersea cables, and logistics hubs—through ar-rangements that blend military deterrence, contractual risk management, and commercial resilience.

From an IR perspective, this concept sits at the intersection of several traditions:

In realist terms, corporate security at sea is a delegated extension of state power. Navies patrol chokepoints like Hormuz or Bab el-Mandeb not primarily to defend borders, but to secure the commercial arteries on which national power depends. Corporations become strategic assets, and their protection is folded into national interest calculations.

From a liberal-institutionalist view, corporate naval security emerges through public–private regimes: information-sharing mechanisms, convoy systems, insurance standards, port security codes (such as ISPS), and multinational task forces where the beneficiary is global commerce ra-ther than any single flag state. Security is produced through coordination, not dominance.

A critical political economy reading sees naval corporate security as the militarization of capi-talism's circulatory system. Security forces increasingly defend profits, infrastructure, and in-vestor confidence, blurring the line between public force and private interest. This is

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visible in the protection of offshore platforms, privately owned ports, and submarine cables that are vital yet largely corporate-owned.

In practice, corporate security in the naval domain is characterized by:

- prioritization of freedom of navigation over sovereignty disputes
- risk-based patrols aligned with shipping and energy routes
- the presence of private maritime security companies alongside navies
- legal ambiguity regarding use of force, accountability, and jurisdiction
- a shift from war-fighting to system-maintenance operations

Conceptually, it differs from traditional maritime security by focusing less on enemies and more on disruptions—piracy, sabotage, gray-zone interference, blockages, or reputational risk to trade flows.

A concise IR-style definition could therefore be:

Corporate security in the naval domain is the set of state-enabled and market-oriented security practices aimed at safeguarding maritime infrastructures and commercial circulation systems, where the referent object of security is economic continuity rather than territorial integrity.

However, this burgeoning partnership is not without constraints. India's financial firepower re-mains limited compared to China's state-backed Belt and Road Initiative, making it reliant on co-financing models with Gulf sovereign funds, Japanese and European partners, or multilateral banks. Political frictions occasionally surface, particularly over the treatment of Indian diaspora communities, religious issues, and the Gulf's sensitivities about internal stability. Nonetheless, the overall trajectory is toward closer strategic and economic convergence, driven by geographic proximity, mutual economic complementarities, and a shared interest in building a stable, multi-polar regional order.

China Strategic Dynamics and Cooperation in the Gulf

China's growing presence in the Gulf is structured around multiple, mutually reinforcing building blocks that extend beyond prestige to tangible influence and power projection. Economically, China integrates itself into regional infrastructure, trade, and energy networks, particularly through Belt and Road Initiative projects, port investments, and long-term energy contracts. These engagements create dependencies and leverage, embedding China in the operational and strategic fabric of the Gulf. Technologically and financially, China exports telecommunications systems, digital infrastructure, and financial services that increase its visibility and influence while shaping regional norms. Diplomatically and culturally, Beijing cultivates prestige through state visits, multilateral forums, and soft power initiatives, reinforcing legitimacy while enabling practical influence in regional negotiations. Securing energy supplies remains central: long-term contracts and investments in energy corridors reduce China's market exposure and provide strategic foot-holds, translating economic integration into bargaining power. Collectively, these building blocks illustrate that China's Gulf engagement is a blend of prestige and practical power, with real impli-cations for regional sub-systems, energy flows, and multilateral dynamics.

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Energy trade forms a foundational pillar of the Gulf's political economy and a key domain where EU engagement intersects with these dynamics. The EU's "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf" seeks to combine trade, investment, and energy cooperation with broader objectives of regional stability and security. Energy flows are not only economic assets but instruments of influence; shifts in production, pricing, or access carry geopolitical weight. Several assumptions frame this approach: global politics remains power-driven, where resources are instrumentalized; the EU and Gulf together account for roughly 20 percent of global GDP; and the current multi-bilateral EU–GCC policy architecture is fragmented, limiting operational effectiveness. Despite these structural challenges, the EU can strengthen energy security, support Gulf economic diversification, and provide a platform for political dialogue, situating energy trade at the intersection of economic and strategic priorities.

Iran's subregional schemes add another layer of complexity. Through alliance-building, influence projection, and coordination with neighboring states, Iran shapes energy corridors, trade networks, and regional alignments. These dynamics interact directly with both China's economic penetration and EU–Gulf energy strategies, creating overlapping spheres of influence that regional actors must navigate. Iraq, Turkey, and the EU exemplify multi-level engagement: domestic governance, regional alignments, and external partnerships intersect, highlighting how energy, economic, and security considerations are inseparable from broader strategic calculations.

Addressing security concerns in EU–Gulf relations requires a multifaceted and sustained ap-proach. Diplomatic engagement remains central, as regular dialogues and robust diplomatic chan-nels foster understanding, build trust, and provide opportunities to resolve conflicts through peaceful means. Regional cooperation on intelligence sharing, counterterrorism measures, and maritime security is essential, and joint military exercises strengthen operational coordination. Promoting arms control and non-proliferation helps prevent escalation of tensions. Cybersecurity and hybrid threats demand dedicated attention, including enhancing digital resilience, countering disinformation campaigns, and addressing hybrid warfare tactics. Preparedness for humanitarian crises, whether arising from natural disasters or conflicts, requires coordinated relief mechanisms. Supporting conflict prevention initiatives and encouraging economic diversification and sustaina-ble development further enhance long-term stability. Sustained engagement, trust-building, and a long-term perspective are indispensable to these efforts.

Enhancing regional cooperation also extends beyond security to economic, social, and environ-mental domains. Economic partnerships can be strengthened through trade agreements, invest-ment facilitation, joint ventures, and technology transfer, creating interdependence that reinforces stability and mutual prosperity. Cultural and educational exchanges foster people-to-people con-nections, deepen mutual understanding, and promote collaboration in academia and research. En-vironmental sustainability, including joint action on climate change and water scarcity, alongside shared best practices for resilient development, forms another pillar of cooperation. Health and pandemic preparedness, encompassing research collaboration, infrastructure development, and coordinated response mechanisms, ensures readiness for future crises. Continuous political dia-logue and conflict resolution initiatives maintain open channels for negotiation and advance pre-ventive strategies. The first EU–GCC Summit in mid-October 2024 provided an opportunity for

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stock-taking, reaffirming the importance of these multidimensional approaches in promoting sta-bility, security, economic growth, and regional resilience.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate the interwoven nature of Gulf politics and strategic en-gagement. China leverages infrastructure, technology, and energy to build both prestige and prac-tical influence; the EU seeks to strengthen energy and trade cooperation while promoting stability and strategic dialogue; Iran projects subregional power; and regional actors like Iraq and Turkey navigate these intersecting currents. Integrating energy trade, security cooperation, and sub-system analysis provides a coherent framework for understanding opportunities, constraints, and policy levers, highlighting where strategic engagement can most effectively advance stability, economic development, and security in the Gulf region.

Japan and South Korea

Japan and South Korea occupy a distinct niche in the Gulf's external economic landscape, con-trasting with the transactional resource diplomacy of China and the strategic energy balancing of Russia. Both are long-standing importers of Gulf hydrocarbons and have evolved from being pri-marily energy clients to becoming key partners in the region's energy transition. Their role is grounded in stable long-term demand for oil, gas, and LNG, while positioning themselves as fu-ture anchor buyers of Gulf-produced green hydrogen and ammonia as these markets emerge. This reliability has made them central reference points for Gulf energy planners seeking to hedge against the volatility of Western markets and the political conditionalities often attached to EU engagement.

Their involvement is also deeply technological. Japanese and South Korean firms are embedded in the Gulf's solar and wind industries, grid modernisation projects, smart cities, and desalination infrastructure—sectors that are pivotal to the Gulf's post-hydrocarbon industrial strategies. They bring advanced know-how in heavy industry, electronics, and nuclear energy, helping Gulf econ-omies move up the value chain rather than remain locked in primary resource exports. South Ko-rea, in particular, has become a pivotal partner for Saudi Arabia in nuclear technology and con-struction, supplying engineering, operational, and training capacities that align with Saudi Ara-bia's Vision 2030 diversification drive. Unlike Chinese actors, whose projects are often debt-financed and infrastructure-led, or Russian firms, whose presence is constrained by sanctions and volatility, Japanese and South Korean engagement has been characterised by technology transfer, co-production, and long-term commercial integration.

However, the risks of these partnerships are structural and long-term. Both Japan and South Korea face demographic headwinds—aging populations and shrinking workforces—that will dampen their energy demand and may constrain their fiscal space for outward investment. Domestic budg-etary pressures could reduce their ability to sustain the large capital outflows and concessional financing packages that have underpinned their Gulf presence. Moreover, their continued in-volvement depends on the global energy trajectory: if energy transitions accelerate faster than expected, their demand for Gulf hydrocarbons could fall sharply, eroding the strategic basis of these relationships.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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In this way, Japan and South Korea form a technological-industrial axis in the Gulf's external partnerships, complementing but also differing from the other major external poles. The EU tends to engage through regulatory and sustainability frameworks; China through state-backed infra-structure and market scale; Russia through energy market coordination and opportunistic trade. Japan and South Korea offer advanced technology, stable medium-term demand, and industrial co-development—but their long-term reliability rests on economic trends over which the Gulf has little influence. This makes them vital yet potentially transient pillars of the Gulf's strategy to diversify its partnerships and embed itself in global clean energy and industrial supply chains.

Russia

Russia plays a more limited yet still strategically significant role in Gulf economic and security dynamics, with its relationship with Saudi Arabia at the core. Coordination through the OPEC+ framework has allowed Moscow, despite being outside OPEC, to exert influence over global oil production levels and price stability. Since the creation of OPEC+ in 2016, Russia has emerged as its most important external partner, effectively transforming OPEC from a cartel of primarily Middle Eastern producers into a broader coalition of major exporters. Its production volumes are large enough to move markets—second only to Saudi Arabia among the OPEC+ states—and its alignment has been central to the cartel's credibility. Markets now respond not only to Saudi sig-nals but also to Russian compliance, making Moscow indispensable to the group's ability to shape prices.

This energy coordination has at times translated into a tacit understanding on broader market be-haviour, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's leadership position while granting Russia a partial buffer from Western isolation. Yet Moscow's position outside OPEC also gives it tactical flexibility. It is not bound by the organisation's internal rules, allowing it to occasionally exceed agreed production levels or delay compliance when domestic needs dictate. This dual role enables Russia to act both as a price stabiliser and as a potential spoiler: its participation gives OPEC+ the collective heft needed to influence global benchmarks, but its autonomy introduces a degree of fragility, forcing Saudi Arabia at times to shoulder deeper production cuts to maintain price floors. This delicate balance between cooperation and defection underscores the transactional nature of the Russo–Saudi energy relationship.

Beyond oil, Russian trade and investment links with the Gulf remain small by global standards, but they have expanded from a low base in recent years, particularly in sectors such as energy ser-vices, logistics, and high-end real estate. Trade turnover between Russia and Saudi Arabia rose sharply in 2024, surpassing 3.8 billion US dollars and growing several-fold in early 2025, driven largely by Russian agricultural exports such as cereals, meat, and vegetable oils. This surge re-flects Saudi efforts to diversify suppliers and Russia's search for alternative markets under sanc-tions, yet it remains modest compared to Saudi Arabia's much larger trade volumes with China, the United States, and the European Union.

Investment ties are far thinner. Western sanctions and financial restrictions have drastically re-duced FDI inflows into Russia, which have fallen by more than half since 2022, constraining Rus-sian firms' capacity to invest abroad and making them riskier partners. Gulf investors, especially Saudi ones, have largely avoided committing large-scale capital to

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Russia given the reputational, legal, and operational risks of secondary sanctions, while Russian outward investment into the Gulf has been sporadic and politically driven rather than market-led. This stands in sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia's rising FDI inflows from Western and Asian sources, which exceeded 30 billion US dollars in 2024 alone.

Moscow has simultaneously tried to cultivate arms sales and political partnerships in the Gulf as part of a broader effort to present itself as an alternative security partner, appealing to regional desires for diversification. Yet its war in Ukraine and resulting international isolation have made it a less reliable or predictable development partner. For Saudi Arabia, deeper engagement with Russia carries significant strategic risk: it can complicate relations with the United States and Eu-rope, expose it to economic sanctions spillover, and undermine its long-term integration with Western markets and technologies. As a result, the Russo–Saudi relationship remains concentrated in tactical energy coordination and opportunistic trade rather than in deep economic interdepend-ence or sustained investment flows.

Multilateral Institutions and Global Finance

Multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Islamic Development Bank, together with global financial centres in London, New York, and increasingly Singapore, form a distinct layer of enabling structures that support the Gulf's re-gional and global engagement. These actors do not exert direct geopolitical leverage like China or Russia, nor are they technologically anchored like Japan or South Korea, but they are crucial in-termediaries that allow the Gulf to mobilise and deploy capital, technical expertise, and govern-ance frameworks. In fragile and conflict-affected states such as Iraq and Yemen, these institutions provide not only financing for infrastructure, reconstruction, and public services but also project management, risk assessment, and regulatory guidance, effectively de-risking Gulf-led investment initiatives and enabling larger-scale co-financing with other bilateral and private actors. The Is-lamic Development Bank adds a particularly Gulf-aligned dimension, blending financial support with Islamic finance principles, which enhances the legitimacy of Gulf investments in culturally and politically resonant ways.

Global financial centres serve as complementary conduits for Gulf sovereign wealth funds, banks, and private investors. London and New York offer deep, liquid capital markets, sophisticated reg-ulatory frameworks, and access to a broad pool of institutional investors, while Singapore is emerging as a strategic hub linking Gulf capital to Asia. These centres enable the Gulf to recycle and deploy its wealth globally, supporting everything from sovereign bond issuance and equity investment to infrastructure financing and energy project participation. Their participation ex-pands the Gulf's influence beyond the region, allowing it to anchor long-term partnerships in mul-tiple markets simultaneously.

Yet reliance on multilateral institutions and international financial hubs carries inherent trade-offs. Conditionalities imposed by the World Bank or IMF, including governance, fiscal, and struc-tural reform requirements, can constrain Gulf discretion when acting as a development financier or regional patron. Engagement with global financial centres exposes Gulf actors to rigorous com-pliance obligations, reputational scrutiny, and regulatory oversight, limiting the opacity and flexi-bility often prized in sovereign investment. These constraints illustrate a

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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structural tension: while such institutions and centres enable the Gulf to project economic and developmental influence across its neighbourhood and globally, they simultaneously bind it to international norms, over-sight, and policy expectations, creating a dynamic balance between strategic autonomy and effec-tive global engagement.

Take-away

External actors contribute different but complementary roles. The US provides security and high-tech innovation; Europe brings renewable energy expertise and cultural soft power; China offers infrastructure and scale; India supplies labour, services, and trade links; Japan and South Korea deliver advanced technology and clean-energy partnerships; Russia influences energy diplomacy; and multilateral institutions provide technical and financial support. The Gulf's challenge is to balance these relationships, avoid overdependence on any single partner, and channel external engagement into projects that genuinely support diversification, knowledge transfer, and regional stability. It goes beyond saying that the inroads of China, India and Russia into the Gulf weighs on the EU's calculus. So much more the Gulf indirectly controls how Iran fares, where France, Italy and Germany have major trading interests. Since Iraq via Turkey and the development road opens for trade via the Persian Gulf circumventing Eurasia or at least China's Belt and Road Infrastruc-ture projects, Iraq is gaining in traction, so long as the Gulfis refuses to engage Iran without a free, independent and sovereign Irak and a stable Yemen, upon which the enlargement of GCC is hinged and the development of cooperation in the Red Sea, where naval commanders for twenty years have reported back the trouble is on land, something that has also started to change without getting a response from Bruxelles other than IGAD, an organisation concerned wtih the Horn of Africa.

Strategic Recommendations

Building on the analysis of China's rise, EU–Gulf energy engagement, and regional sub-system dynamics, several strategic recommendations emerge for the EU and its partners. First, the EU should deepen energy and trade partnerships with Gulf states, leveraging joint economic weight to enhance stability, ensure secure energy flows, and support economic diversification. Coordinated investment in infrastructure, technology, and digital systems can provide alternatives to unilateral external influence, particularly in areas where China's projects create long-term dependencies. Sustained diplomatic engagement and multilateral dialogue are essential to manage tensions aris-ing from overlapping spheres of influence, including Iran's subregional strategies, while promot-ing conflict prevention and regional resilience. Security cooperation should remain multidimen-sional, combining intelligence sharing, counterterrorism initiatives, maritime security, cybersecu-rity, and crisis preparedness to address both conventional and hybrid threats. Finally, integrating economic, environmental, health, and cultural dimensions into the EU–Gulf partnership will rein-force trust, mutual understanding, and long-term strategic alignment.

By pursuing these measures, the EU can balance the dual imperatives of responding to China's expanding presence and promoting regional resilience, creating conditions for effective coopera-tion and influence across the Gulf. This approach positions the EU not only

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as an economic part-ner but also as a stabilizing actor capable of shaping regional outcomes through coordinated, comprehensive engagement.

16.0 STRATEGIC DYNAMICS AND COOPERATION IN THE GULF

China's growing presence in the Gulf is structured around multiple, mutually reinforcing building blocks that extend beyond prestige to tangible influence and power projection. Economically, China integrates itself into regional infrastructure, trade, and energy networks, particularly through Belt and Road Initiative projects, port investments, and long-term energy contracts. These engagements create dependencies and leverage, embedding China in the operational and strategic fabric of the Gulf. Technologically and financially, China exports telecommunications systems, digital infrastructure, and financial services that increase its visibility and influence while shaping regional norms. Diplomatically and culturally, Beijing cultivates prestige through state visits, multilateral forums, and soft power initiatives, reinforcing legitimacy while enabling practical influence in regional negotiations. Securing energy supplies remains central: long-term contracts and investments in energy corridors reduce China's market exposure and provide strategic foot-holds, translating economic integration into bargaining power. Collectively, these building blocks illustrate that China's Gulf engagement is a blend of prestige and practical power, with real impli-cations for regional sub-systems, energy flows, and multilateral dynamics.

Energy trade forms a foundational pillar of the Gulf's political economy and a key domain where EU engagement intersects with these dynamics. The EU's "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf" seeks to combine trade, investment, and energy cooperation with broader objectives of regional stability and security. Energy flows are not only economic assets but instruments of influence; shifts in production, pricing, or access carry geopolitical weight. Several assumptions frame this approach: global politics remains power-driven, where resources are instrumentalized; the EU and Gulf together account for roughly 20 percent of global GDP; and the current multi-bilateral EU–GCC policy architecture is fragmented, limiting operational effectiveness. Despite these structural challenges, the EU can strengthen energy security, support Gulf economic diversification, and provide a platform for political dialogue, situating energy trade at the intersection of economic and strategic priorities.

Iran's subregional schemes add another layer of complexity. Through alliance-building, influence projection, and coordination with neighboring states, Iran shapes energy corridors, trade networks, and regional alignments. These dynamics interact directly with both China's economic penetration and EU–Gulf energy strategies, creating overlapping spheres of influence that regional actors must navigate. Iraq, Turkey, and the EU exemplify multi-level engagement: domestic governance, regional alignments, and external partnerships intersect, highlighting how energy, economic, and security considerations are inseparable from broader strategic calculations.

Addressing security concerns in EU–Gulf relations requires a multifaceted and sustained ap-proach. Diplomatic engagement remains central, as regular dialogues and robust diplomatic chan-nels foster understanding, build trust, and provide opportunities to resolve conflicts through peaceful means. Regional cooperation on intelligence sharing, counterterrorism measures, and maritime security is essential, and joint military exercises strengthen

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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operational coordination. Promoting arms control and non-proliferation helps prevent escalation of tensions. Cybersecurity and hybrid threats demand dedicated attention, including enhancing digital resilience, countering disinformation campaigns, and addressing hybrid warfare tactics. Preparedness for humanitarian crises, whether arising from natural disasters or conflicts, requires coordinated relief mechanisms. Supporting conflict prevention initiatives and encouraging economic diversification and sustaina-ble development further enhance long-term stability. Sustained engagement, trust-building, and a long-term perspective are indispensable to these efforts.

Enhancing regional cooperation also extends beyond security to economic, social, and environ-mental domains. Economic partnerships can be strengthened through trade agreements, invest-ment facilitation, joint ventures, and technology transfer, creating interdependence that reinforces stability and mutual prosperity. Cultural and educational exchanges foster people-to-people con-nections, deepen mutual understanding, and promote collaboration in academia and research. En-vironmental sustainability, including joint action on climate change and water scarcity, alongside shared best practices for resilient development, forms another pillar of cooperation. Health and pandemic preparedness, encompassing research collaboration, infrastructure development, and coordinated response mechanisms, ensures readiness for future crises. Continuous political dia-logue and conflict resolution initiatives maintain open channels for negotiation and advance pre-ventive strategies. The first EU–GCC Summit in mid-October 2024 provided an opportunity for stock-taking, reaffirming the importance of these multidimensional approaches in promoting sta-bility, security, economic growth, and regional resilience.

The interplay between formal and informal foreign policy dialogue is particularly significant in the Gulf context. Formal dialogue, characterized by structured exchanges, legal obligations, and clear protocols, underpins treaties, energy agreements, and multilateral arrangements. Such mech-anisms enhance legitimacy, transparency, and predictability, providing a durable framework for managing regional disputes and long-term cooperation. Yet their rigidity and time-consuming nature can limit flexibility, delaying responses to emergent crises or rapidly evolving geopolitical developments. Informal dialogue, by contrast, allows for spontaneous, flexible, and trust-building interactions. It is particularly useful in crisis management, rapid coordination, and confidence-building measures, complementing the stability offered by formal channels. However, informal mechanisms carry risks, including reduced transparency, potential unintended consequences, and questions of legitimacy. Effective EU–Gulf engagement relies on a calibrated balance of both ap-proaches, integrating formal structures for stability with informal mechanisms for flexibility, re-sponsiveness, and relationship-building. This dual approach also provides a framework to navigate China's increasing regional presence and Iran's subregional influence, ensuring that strategic ob-jectives are pursued coherently and effectively.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate the interwoven nature of Gulf politics and strategic en-gagement. China leverages infrastructure, technology, and energy to build both prestige and prac-tical influence; the EU seeks to strengthen energy and trade cooperation while promoting stability and strategic dialogue; Iran projects subregional power; and regional actors like Iraq and Turkey navigate these intersecting currents. Integrating energy trade, security cooperation, and sub-system analysis provides a coherent framework for

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understanding opportunities, constraints, and policy levers, highlighting where strategic engagement can most effectively advance stability, economic development, and security in the Gulf region.

Building on this analysis, several strategic recommendations emerge. The EU should deepen ener-gy and trade partnerships with Gulf states, leveraging joint economic weight to enhance stability, ensure secure energy flows, and support economic diversification. Coordinated investment in in-frastructure, technology, and digital systems can provide alternatives to unilateral external influ-ence, particularly in areas where China's projects create long-term dependencies. Sustained dip-lomatic engagement and multilateral dialogue are essential to manage tensions arising from over-lapping spheres of influence, including Iran's subregional strategies, while promoting conflict prevention and regional resilience. Security cooperation should remain multidimensional, com-bining intelligence sharing, counterterrorism initiatives, maritime security, cybersecurity, and crisis preparedness to address both conventional and hybrid threats. Integrating economic, envi-ronmental, health, and cultural dimensions into the EU–Gulf partnership reinforces trust, mutual understanding, and long-term strategic alignment.

By pursuing these measures, the EU can balance the dual imperatives of responding to China's expanding presence and promoting regional resilience, creating conditions for effective coopera-tion and influence across the Gulf. This approach positions the EU not only as an economic part-ner but also as a stabilizing actor capable of shaping regional outcomes through coordinated, comprehensive engagement.

16.1 South Asia- Gulf Relations

The relationship between South Asia and the Gulf is deeply rooted in history and continues to be one of the most important interregional connections of the contemporary era. It is shaped by longstanding trade links, cultural and religious ties, labor migration, economic interdependence, and geopolitical calculations. Its evolution reflects both continuities from the past and responses to global and regional transformations.

Historically, the Arabian Sea has served as a corridor of exchange, connecting the Indian subcon-tinent and the Arabian Peninsula through maritime commerce. These interactions facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also ideas, cultures, and religions. Islam, in particular, established a durable bond between South Asia and the Gulf, with South Asia hosting one of the world's larg-est Muslim populations. The Hajj pilgrimage has further reinforced transnational connections, sustaining enduring networks of identity and community. Migration has emerged as the most defining feature of the modern South Asia–Gulf relationship. Millions of South Asians—primarily from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—live and work in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Their presence underpins key sectors such as construction, services, and domestic work. Remittances from these workers constitute a vital lifeline for their home economies, providing foreign exchange and supporting household consumption and poverty alleviation. For countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh, these inflows represent a significant share of national GDP. At the same time, in Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar,

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South Asians constitute a demographic majority, shaping the cultural and social fabric of these societies (Jawaid & Raza, 2016).

The economic dimension of this relationship extends beyond remittances. The Gulf remains the primary supplier of oil and gas to South Asia, making energy security a central pillar of interde-pendence. Conversely, Gulf sovereign wealth funds and private investors channel capital into South Asian infrastructure, real estate, and financial services, providing an important source of development financing. South Asia also exports agricultural goods, textiles, and services to the Gulf, thereby contributing to the Gulf states' food security and diversifying the commercial rela-tionship (De, Quayyum, & Yousefi, 2019).

Security and strategic concerns add further complexity. Gulf states rely on South Asian partners for military training, defense cooperation, and, at times, direct security support. Pakistan and India maintain longstanding defense ties with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Both regions also share interests in maritime security, given the strategic importance of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf for international shipping and energy flows. Yet these ties are conditioned by broader geopolitical rivalries, including competition between India and Pakistan, the Saudi–Iran rivalry, and the roles of extra-regional powers such as the United States and China (Akçay, 2021).

Political and diplomatic engagement has intensified in recent decades. Regular high-level visits, joint commissions, and multilateral platforms institutionalize cooperation. Diaspora communities also play a critical role, as Gulf states leverage them economically and politically, while South Asian governments seek to protect migrant workers' rights. The balance of influence is shifting, however. While Pakistan has historically enjoyed close ties with Saudi Arabia, India and Bangla-desh have significantly strengthened their relationships with Gulf states in areas such as trade, investment, and technology partnerships.

Despite its strengths, the South Asia–Gulf relationship faces structural challenges. Labor rights remain a persistent concern, as many migrants endure exploitative working conditions, wage dis-putes, and limited legal protections. Economic vulnerabilities arise from fluctuations in global oil prices and the Gulf's transition toward post-oil economies, which could diminish demand for mi-grant labor and remittance flows. Political and security tensions, including bilateral conflicts in South Asia and rivalries within the Middle East, periodically strain relations. Domestic politics in South Asia, particularly where diaspora and religious issues intersect, also influence policymaking toward the Gulf (Malik & Rehman, 2022). Emerging trends suggest a gradual diversification of ties. Gulf states' development strategies, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aim to shift their economies toward technology, finance, edu-cation, and tourism, thereby creating new opportunities for South Asian firms and professionals. Climate change and food security imperatives further reinforce South Asia's role as a key supplier of agricultural products and a potential partner in renewable energy cooperation. At the same time, China's growing role in both regions, through the Belt and Road Initiative and extensive energy and infrastructure investments, introduces new dynamics that South Asian and Gulf states must navigate (Rahman et al., 2021). Taken together, the South Asia–Gulf relationship is multifaceted, asymmetric, and interdependent. The Gulf provides energy, capital, and employment opportunities, while South Asia supplies la-bor, markets, and diplomatic engagement. While migration and

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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remittances remain foundational, the strategic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of the relationship are becoming increasingly prominent as both regions confront the challenges of globalization, climate change, and shifting power dynamics in the international order.

16.2 Strategic Implications of the Saudi-Pakistani Mutual Defense Treaty

The multi-layered dynamic of the region and level of distrust of the US is underlined by the re-cent institutionalisation of the Saudi-Pakistani alliance in terms of a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement. According to the joint statement the pat declares "that any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both"....it reflects the shared commitment of both nations to enhance their security and to achieving security and peace in the region and the world, and aims to develop aspects of defense cooperation between the two countries and strengthen joint deterrence against any aggression" .The statement also highlights "shared strate-gic interests and close defense cooperation" as the foundation of the agreement. Since KSA is known to have purchased a nuclear bomb for $1bn from Pakistan, located on a shelf somewhere in Pakistan, this can only be read as a signal the Saudi Arabia no longer rejects to develop a bomb of its own, whereas Pakistan see itself as having vested interests in the Persian Gulf as a non-member.

For Saudi Arabia, the pact is a response to heightened security threats in the region, notably after recent Israeli strikes and broader instability fuelled by conflicts such as Gaza and the Israeli attack on Hamas' leadership in Qatar not to mention the fruit of patient and pragmatric diplomacy over the decades. It institutionializes an alliance with Pakistan, the world's only majority nuclear pow-er,providing Riyadh with a stronger deterrent capability. The nuclear element is especially empha-sised in Saudi commentary, as it effectively extends a nuclear umbrella to the Kingdom.

Pakistan sees the agreement as a consolidation of a decades-old strategic partnership, reinforcing its global strategic partnership, reinforcingits global relevance and highlightening its military ca-pabilities – most notably its nuclear deterrent – at a time when it also faces friction with India.

The pact widely viewed a NATO-like mutual defenese framework in the Islamic world, signalling to both allies and adversaries that any attack on Saudi Arabia or Pakistan would trigger joint mili-tary response.

Regional actors such as Iran and Israel are likely to interpret this as an effort to contain their in-fluence and bolster deterrence against direct or proxy conflict.Israel, in particular, faces a new strategic challenge, as its military calculations must now consider a Saudi bloc supported by a nuclear.armed state.

India, which has also deepened its relations with Saudi Arabia, regards the pact as a move that could embolden Pakistan and increase regional security uncertainty. India has responded cautious-ly, stating it will study the implications for national security and regional stability. It will have to take account of greater coordination in its calculatins when adressnig disputes of crises involving Pakistan such as Kashmir.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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For global actors such as the United States and China, the pact signifies waning Gulf confidence in US security guarantees and a window for China to play a deeper roloe in the Gulf-South Asian security architecture. The pact encourages other Gulf and Arab states to consider similar security collaborations, poten-tially fostering a collective defense mindset in the GCC but also risking greater polarisation. It underlines the diversification of Saudi security policy, moving beyond US reliance and positioning Riyadh as a more assertive regional power capable of shaping the future security framework – often in concert with Pakistan's military resources. What the content would be is difficult to pre-dict. There must be peace in Yemen and governance strengthened in the Red Sea and progress in Ircaq for dialogue to be resumed out of a GCC+1 format, so much we understand.

To sum-up, the Saudi-Pakistani mutual defense agreement is seen as a watershed moment in re-gional security, reshaping alliances and deterrence startegies in the Gulf and South Asia. Both Riyadh and Islamabad portray the pact as a proactive step for mutual and regional security, re-flecting shared anxieties in a period of global realignment and diminishing US influence. Regional perceptions are mixed, with some states wary of stronger Saudi-Pakistani military bloc, while oth-ers may seek to emulate collective security structures to counter shifting threats and alliances. The oerall impact will depend on diplomatic management while a stronger Saudi-Pakistani axis may deter aggression and promote order, missteps could escalate rivalries or create new flashpoints, requiring countries like INDIA AND Iran to respond carefully. The pact thus presents both stabili-sation opportunities and new risks, making the next period in the gulf and South Asia security highly dynamic and dependent on the responses of the neighboring states.

16.3 Towards a Saudi-Iranian Concordat?

A conceptual division of labour between Riyadh and Tehran implies that Saudi Arabia would as-sert primary influence across the Red Sea–Horn of Africa corridor (maritime security, alliance building with coastal states, counter insurgency), while Iran continues to exert influence primarily within the Persian Gulf–Hormuz theatre (maritime chokepoints, deterrence postures, proxy networks). This bifurcation reflects geostrategic realities and competitive incentives: Saudi Arabia's economic diversification and infrastructure ambitions along the Red Sea coast require stability there, whereas Iran's security calculations centre on the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf's cen-tral energy trade artery. Such a pattern emerges in current geopolitics, including Saudi efforts to counter UAE influence in Yemen and the Horn and Iran's enduring regional ties that hinge on the Gulf nodal geography. (European Council on Foreign Relations)

Cross Tabulation: Implications of a Saudi–Iran Division of Labour

Dimension	Saudi Arabia (Red Sea Focus)	Iran (Persian Gulf Focus)
Strategic Priority	Stabilise and secure Red Sea maritime routes and adjacent littoral states; protect Vision 2030 coastal infrastructure projects. (	Control and influence Persian Gulf security dynamics; maintain leverage over Strait of Hormuz chokepoint.
Mode of Influence	Diplomatic-military engagement with Red Sea littoral states, counter-proxy	Asymmetric deterrence (missiles, proxies), geo-economic leverage via energy exports, strategic partnerships

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	efforts (e.g., Yemen), logistics hubs; alliance building to counter internal competitors (e.g., UAE).	with non-Gulf actors.)
Security Implications	Potential to reduce Red Sea maritime insecurity if Riyadh consolidates policing roles; can provoke local resistance or rivalries (e.g., with UAE, Horn states). (	Persistent risk of Gulf security dilemmas (e.g., threats to shipping, Hormuz disruptions); encourages external balancing by foreign powers. (
External Actor Roles	May attract Western or EU maritime security cooperation (e.g., EU naval operations, naval exercises) to secure trade routes. (	Continues to be focal in wider Great Power balancing (US, China, Russia) due to energy and deterrence centrality. (
Regional Stability	Positive if local partners align; negative if spillovers into Ethiopia/Somalia/Sudan complicate governance.	Regional volatility remains high if Hormuz tensions escalate; closure risks disrupt global energy markets.
Economic Consequences	Promotes Red Sea coastal economic corridors and connectivity; risks militarisation deterring investment if unchecked.	Energy revenue centrality provides state revenue but also vulnerability to sanctions and conflict.

Evaluative Implications

A Saudi led security focus in the Red Sea could help stabilise a critical global chokepoint essen-tial for energy and trade flows, potentially attracting multinational maritime cooperation such as EU missions (e.g., Operation Aspides). However, this role can deepen regional competition with other Gulf actors (like the UAE) and external powers with overlapping interests, raising new frictions. Conversely, Iran's enduring role in the Persian Gulf centralises the Strait of Hormuz as both a strategic asset and vulnerability; any escalation or threat to close or disrupt traffic would have immediate economic and geopolitical repercussions.

A clear division of labour might reduce direct confrontation between Riyadh and Tehran by clari-fying spheres of influence. Yet, such compartmentalisation also reinforces separate theatres of competition rather than a unified security framework. Persistent proxy networks and reciprocal deterrence postures (missiles, drones, asymmetric forces) remind us that the boundary between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf theatres is permeable; conflict in one can spill into the other. (siyasatarabiya.dohainstitute.org)

Saudi Arabia's investments in Red Sea infrastructure and connectivity—port development, special economic zones, tourism projects—are contingent on a stable maritime environment. (Luiss Med-iterranean Platform) Success here could strengthen Riyadh's leadership credentials in the Red Sea region, but it also requires careful management of relations with local littoral states and other Gulf partners. Iran's focus on energy export stability through the Persian Gulf fuels its bargaining power in global markets but binds it to a security posture that invites counterbalancing by external powers (e.g., US naval presence, strategic partnerships). (conferences.aue.ae)

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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For external stakeholders like the EU, this division of labour presents both opportunities and chal-lenges. It suggests that differentiated engagement—supporting maritime security and economic connectivity in the Red Sea while addressing energy security and de escalation in the Persian Gulf—can be tailored to each theatre. However, a coherent regional strategy also requires mecha-nisms to bridge Red Sea and Gulf security architectures, preventing fragmentation and unin-tended escalation.

A Saudi–Iran division of labour that sees Riyadh as the principal security actor in the Red Sea and Tehran as the dominant actor in the Persian Gulf aligns with current geopolitical patterns and each state's strategic priorities. This division can reduce binary confrontation if managed within broader multilateral frameworks, but it also risks solidifying competitive rivalries and re-inforcing external power involvement. Understanding these spatially differentiated roles is essen-tial for designing policies that enhance regional stability rather than entrench division and vola-tility.

For this reason and in order not to complicate matters further, perhaps the path of least resistance would be to proceed on strengthened cooperation on environmental security in the Red Sea out of PERGSA, leaving an opening to KSA engagement with Israel, while proceeding with the informal foreign policy dialogue in the Gulf as outlined above. Indeed, Riyadh's sense of security is very much informed by the desire to engage with Jerusalem on the clear premise the goals of the na-tional movement of the Palestinans will be accommodated. The Israeli government understands this and wants KSA included in the Abraham accords, and is as much interested in regionalisation in the Red Sea, as are Jordan and most of the other riparians, benefitting from an increase in intra-regional trade due to millennia old habit of trading together and social interaction across this ocean in the making amidst decades of security competition driven by competing investments in ports, infrastructure and naval bases. The KSA is a pragmatic and patient actor and the paymaster in the region, with whom the EU nurture a growing bilateral trade, and it is also the first arab country to have fully modernised, something that gives it streetcreds and growing admiration in this notoriously unstable and volatile region. Its role in the Red Sea has traditionally been linked to a stable Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia and a lessening of Iran's role, and at the same time it has helped stabilising and invested heavily in post-Morsi Egypt.

This has to be compared to the EU Naval commanders have reported back to the center for dec-ades that the challenges in the Red Sea are onshore, and not so much at sea, yet Iran's all out con-frontation with Israel and geoeconomic instrumentalision of the Houthi's grievances fuels an inse-curity spiral that dictates greater EU involvement in upholding order and defining an equilibrium in the search for stability and prosperity in this corridor upon which 30% of EU's export-import depend, and 60% of India's export goes exists and enters.

17.0 IMPACT OF A MORE COOPERATIVE PERSIAN GULF

A more cooperative and less conflictual Persian Gulf would mark a transformative shift in the architecture of regional and global stability. The Gulf is not merely a geographic basin—it is a strategic fulcrum where energy flows, maritime security, ideological contestation, and global eco-nomic interdependence converge. Its evolution from a theatre of rivalry to a platform of collabora-tion would yield cascading benefits across multiple domains.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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The Persian Gulf has long been defined by zero-sum competition, particularly between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This rivalry has fueled proxy conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, destabilizing fragile states and obstructing post-conflict recovery. A cooperative Gulf would reduce the operational space for non-state actors, curtail arms prolifera-tion, and enable national governments to reassert control over their territories. As noted by the Middle East Institute, recent diplomatic overtures—such as the resumption of ties between Tehran and Riyadh—signal a shift toward de-escalation and pragmatic engagement.

Security cooperation would enhance maritime safety in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, two of the world's most critical chokepoints. Joint naval exercises, shared surveillance systems, and coordinated emergency response protocols could prevent miscalculations and ensure uninterrupted energy flows. Maritime Education's analysis underscores that nearly 30% of the world's seaborne oil trade passes through the Persian Gulf, making its stability a global impera-tive.

A less conflictual Gulf would unlock vast economic potential. Cross-border investments, harmo-nized trade regimes, and integrated infrastructure projects could transform the region into a hub of diversified growth. The GCC's Vision 2030 frameworks, particularly Saudi Arabia's, emphasize economic modernization and reduced dependence on hydrocarbons. A cooperative Gulf would accelerate these transitions by attracting foreign direct investment and enabling regional supply chains to flourish.

The development of free trade zones, intermodal transport systems, and digital customs plat-forms—as highlighted in regional maritime agreements—would enhance logistical efficiency and reduce transaction costs. Iran's participation in such frameworks, contingent on sanctions relief and regulatory alignment, could further integrate its economy into the regional matrix.

Globally, a cooperative Gulf would recalibrate the engagement strategies of major powers. The United States, China, and the European Union could shift from crisis management to strategic partnership, supporting regional initiatives rather than imposing external templates. The Cam-bridge University Press's International Relations of the Persian Gulf emphasizes that the securiti-zation of sectarianism and existential threat narratives has long distorted diplomatic possibilities. A cooperative turn would allow for the emergence of indigenous multilateral institutions capable of managing disputes and fostering collective security.

Multilateral diplomacy could also be extended to climate governance, migration management, and cyber resilience—domains where Gulf states have shared vulnerabilities and overlapping inter-ests.

Reduced geopolitical risk premiums would stabilize oil and gas prices, benefiting both producers and consumers. Strategic reserves would be less frequently tapped, and long-term contracts could be negotiated with greater confidence. The Gulf's ports—such as Jebel Ali, Bandar Abbas, and Dammam—would become more attractive to global investors, enhancing supply chain predicta-bility and reducing insurance costs.

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ISSN 2582-0176

Asian markets, particularly China and India, are increasingly shaping Gulf trade patterns. A coop-erative Gulf would facilitate this geo-economic shift, enabling smoother energy transactions, in-frastructure financing, and technological exchange.

Joint Gulf initiatives could address climate stress, water scarcity, and pollution—issues that trans-cend borders and require collective action. Coordinated fisheries management, marine conserva-tion, and climate adaptation strategies would align the region with global sustainability goals. Maritime Education's analysis points to rising sea levels and temperature as existential threats to Gulf ecosystems.

Human security would also benefit. Reduced militarization would allow governments to reallocate resources toward healthcare, education, and social welfare. Cultural and educational exchanges could foster pluralism and reduce sectarian polarization, strengthening civil society and counter-ing extremist ideologies.

In sum, a cooperative Persian Gulf would not merely pacify a volatile region—it would catalyze a new era of strategic foresight, economic dynamism, and diplomatic maturity. It would shift the narrative from containment to co-creation, offering a model for other contested regions to emu-late.

GCC Homework

The Gulf Cooperation Council faces both the imperatives and the opportunities of transforming the region into a more cohesive, resilient, and outward-looking bloc. Regional security coopera-tion is central to this vision. Establishing integrated joint counter-terrorism task forces across GCC states, equipped with shared intelligence protocols and coordinated operations, can dramati-cally enhance the collective capacity to respond to threats. Maritime security can be strengthened through coordinated naval patrols, advanced monitoring systems, and the safeguarding of critical shipping lanes, ensuring that this vital corridor of global commerce remains protected. Rapid re-sponse units capable of acting across land and sea borders provide flexibility and deterrence, while a GCC-wide cybersecurity network shields critical infrastructure from the growing spec-trum of digital threats. Progress in these areas can be measured through tangible indicators such as joint exercises completed, response times, reductions in smuggling or cyber incidents, and effec-tive intelligence exchanges.

Economic diversification is equally critical, addressing the necessity of moving beyond hydrocar-bon dependence toward sustainable, knowledge-driven prosperity. Investments in renewable ener-gy, including solar, wind, and hydrogen projects, are essential for both environmental resilience and long-term economic stability. The development of digital economy hubs, fintech incubators, and technological innovation clusters can nurture entrepreneurship and strengthen regional com-petitiveness. Collaborative research partnerships with European and global universities, coupled with robust public-private partnerships, allow for knowledge transfer and capacity building, measured by patents filed, startups launched, and workforce trained. Together, these measures can transform the Gulf into a diversified, forward-looking economic space capable of engaging global markets on multiple fronts.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Diplomatic engagement, particularly with Iran, remains another crucial element. Structured bilat-eral and multilateral dialogues, grounded in transparency and reciprocity, can address sensitive issues such as nuclear ambitions, maritime boundaries, and trade disputes. Confidence-building measures, ranging from joint disaster response exercises to humanitarian coordination, provide tangible proof of goodwill and shared interests. Technical working groups on energy, environmen-tal management, and infrastructure projects further solidify cooperation, while cultural and aca-demic exchanges foster long-term understanding across societies. Progress can be measured both in the number of agreements reached and the level of sustained engagement between actors.

Regional integration and governance strengthening are vital for long-term cohesion, particularly in the context of Yemen's potential incorporation into the GCC framework. Harmonizing institu-tional capacities, standardizing regulatory frameworks, and enhancing policy coordination can solidify a cohesive bloc. Providing training, technical assistance, and shared mechanisms for cri-sis response allows the GCC to embed governance norms that bolster both resilience and legitima-cy. Success can be assessed through improvements in cross-border infrastructure, coordinated fiscal and trade policies, and increased institutional capacity across member states.

Economic and infrastructural connectivity beyond the Gulf further amplifies the region's poten-tial. Linking the Gulf to the Levant, Maghreb, the Euro-Mediterranean, and Asia requires vision-ary projects in logistics, trade corridors, and energy networks. Expanding port capacity, high-speed rail links, and regional digital infrastructure can create a seamless economic continuum across continents. Integrating renewable energy grids and fostering joint industrial zones magni-fies the GCC's influence and aligns with European and Asian partners, producing a multiplier ef-fect in trade, investment, and innovation. Indicators of progress include trade volume increases, foreign direct investment flows, and measurable improvements in interregional transport and en-ergy connectivity.

Through these measures—security, economic diversification, diplomacy, governance integration, and infrastructural connectivity—the Gulf emerges not as a narrow chokepoint, but as a vibrant corridor of shared opportunity. Each initiative, anchored in concrete actions and measurable out-comes, transforms ambition into capability. The flourishing of the Gulf depends on the interplay of these dimensions, the vision of its leaders, and the commitment of external partners to engage as collaborators rather than patrons. Only then can the region realize its potential as a hub of resil-ience, influence, and prosperity linking the Gulf to the Levant, the Maghreb, Europe, and Asia.

GCC Homework: Priorities, Targets, and Timelines

First, finalize a comprehensive regional security framework with clear protocols for counter-terrorism, maritime defense, and cybersecurity, ensuring shared intelligence and operational in-teroperability. The target is to establish fully operational joint task forces across all GCC states within 24 months, with quarterly joint exercises and annual cybersecurity drills to measure effec-tiveness.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Second, accelerate economic diversification by identifying priority sectors beyond hydrocarbons, investing in renewable energy and digital infrastructure, and fostering public-private partnerships. The target is to achieve a 15–20% increase in non-oil GDP contributions within five years, including at least three operational renewable energy megaprojects and the launch of five re-gional innovation hubs within 36 months.

Third, formalize structured diplomatic engagement with Iran and other neighbors using confi-dence-building measures, technical working groups, and cultural exchanges to stabilize borders and resolve disputes. The target is to hold biannual high-level summits, implement six technical working groups on energy, water, trade, and maritime issues within 12 months, and achieve for-mal agreements on at least two confidence-building measures per year.

Fourth, standardize governance frameworks and institutional capacities across member states to integrate potential new entrants like Yemen, including regulatory alignment and joint crisis re-sponse mechanisms. The target is to achieve full regulatory harmonization for trade, invest-ment, and security coordination within 36 months, with joint crisis simulations conducted an-nually and technical assistance programs deployed within 18 months.

Fifth, implement regional connectivity projects linking ports, railways, energy grids, and digital networks with the Levant, Maghreb, and broader Euro-Asian corridors, creating measurable growth in trade, investment, and logistics efficiency. The target is to complete at least three flag-ship cross-border infrastructure projects within five years, including a regional energy grid, two high-speed rail corridors, and expanded port and logistics hubs, while increasing intra-GCC trade volume by 25%.

Finally, establish monitoring, evaluation, and feedback systems across all initiatives to ensure accountability, adapt strategies dynamically, and maintain alignment between ambition and achievement. The target is to implement a GCC-wide strategic monitoring dashboard within 12 months, with quarterly reporting and annual strategic reviews to track progress against all secu-rity, economic, diplomatic, and connectivity goals.

Table - GCC homework roadmap, with tasks, targets, timelines, and measurable KPIs:

Component	Key Tasks	Targets	Timeline	Measurable KPIs
Regional Security Cooperation	Establish joint counter-terrorism and maritime security task forces; implement cybersecurity network; conduct joint exercises	Fully operational GCC task forces; unified intelligence-sharing protocol	24 months	Number of joint exercises; response times; cybersecurity incident reduction; intelligence exchange frequency
Economic Diversification	Invest in renewable energy, digital economy, and technological innovation; foster public-private partnerships	15–20% increase in non-oil GDP; 3 renewable energy megaprojects; 5 regional innovation hubs	36 months	Non-oil GDP share; number of projects launched; startups incubated; patents filed
Governance Integration	Harmonize regulatory	Full regulatory harmonization;	36 months	Regulations aligned; joint

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	frameworks; build institutional capacities; integrate Yemen into GCC mechanisms	operational crisis response mechanisms		simulations conducted; technical assistance programs delivered
Regional Connectivity	Develop ports, railways, energy grids, and digital networks linking Gulf to Levant, Maghreb, Europe, and Asia	3 flagship infrastructure projects; 25% increase in intra-GCC trade	5 years	Project completion rate; trade volume increase; energy grid operational metrics; transport efficiency improvements
Regional Connectivity	Develop ports, railways, energy grids, and digital networks linking Gulf to Levant, Maghreb, Europe, and Asia	3 flagship infrastructure projects; 25% increase in intra-GCC trade	5 years	Project completion rate; trade volume increase; energy grid operational metrics; transport efficiency improvements
Monitoring & Evaluation	Implement strategic dashboard; track progress; adapt policies dynamically	GCC-wide monitoring system; quarterly reports; annual strategic reviews	12 months	Dashboard operational; reports published; KPIs tracked; corrective actions implemented

That kicks Ass.

Finale: A Vision for a Cooperative Gulf

To imagine a more cooperative Persian Gulf is to gaze upon a paradox made flesh — a sea that unites and divides, a horizon that promises and threatens, a history that binds and breaks.

Its waters have carried the commerce of empires, its deserts have powered the engines of the world — yet its abundance has too often bred insecurity, and its wealth has too often sown fear. And yet, beneath the turbulence runs a current of possibility. The Gulf's youth are more connected than ever, its cities rise like mirages made real, and its economies tilt from hydrocarbons to knowledge, from extraction to innovation, from rivalry to reciprocity.

Even old rivals, scarred by decades of suspicion, are beginning to rediscover the grammar of dia-logue, the art of compromise, the courage of restraint.

But this transformation is a high wire stretched over peril. Mismanaged, the Gulf may fragment; nurtured, it may converge. It could splinter into enclaves of fear, theatres of proxy war, corridors of ecological collapse — or it could become a corridor of clean energy, a fulcrum of global logis-tics, a common of maritime security from Hormuz to Bab al-Mandab.

This is the wager of cooperation: to choose patience over haste, dialogue over dominance, archi-tecture over anarchy. It demands that Gulf states look beyond zero-sum balances of power, that external actors temper rivalry with responsibility, and that new structures of trust be allowed to grow — even if they are fragile, even if they are slow.

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The Gulf has too often been treated as a prize to be claimed; it might yet become a common to be tended.

If the Gulf states transform suspicion into solidarity, and if external actors engage not as patrons but as genuine partners, this once-fractured waterway could evolve from the world's tightest chokepoint into a strategic corridor linking over 2 billion people across the Gulf, the Levant, the Maghreb, the Euro-Mediterranean, and Asia. It could facilitate trade worth trillions of dollars annually, ensure the secure transit of more than 40 percent of global oil shipments, and serve as a conduit for knowledge, technology, and cultural exchange. In doing so, the Gulf would not merely secure its own future but become a central axis of connectivity and cooperation across continents, shaping the region's trajectory for decades to come. But if mismanaged, this corridor could instead harden into a fault line of rivalry, a sieve of insecurity, a theater where competition eclipses cooperation—yet if guided wisely, it could become the artery through which the region's prosperity, stability, and influence pulse for generations.

18.0 EVALUATION OF THE EU'S SSR PROGRAM IN IRAQ

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq have evolved from a grassroots militia movement into a complex and influential component of the nation's security apparatus. Initially formed in 2014 to combat the Islamic State (ISIS), the PMF was officially recognized by the Iraqi govern-ment in 2016 as a legitimate part of the national security forces. However, many PMF factions maintain strong ties to Iran, raising concerns about their influence on Iraqi sovereignty and re-gional stability.

The United States has expressed significant concern over recent Iraqi legislative efforts to formal-ize the PMF's role within the state security structure. A proposed law aimed at integrating the PMF more closely into Iraq's military framework has faced strong opposition from Washington. U.S. officials argue that such legislation could empower Iran-aligned militias and undermine Iraq's sovereignty. In response, the U.S. has reportedly warned Iraq of potential military action against PMF bases if the law proceeds Kurdistan24 - 24 كوردستان. As a result, the Iraqi government has postponed the bill indefinitely, opting instead to issue guidelines to address issues stemming from the 2016 law in the absence of diplomatic certainty about the EU's intentions to swap-in the full integration of the PMF in return for the EU's resumption of diplomatic relations and discreet dialogue with Teheran on governance issues on certain problems of a domestic nature in Iran. Quelle Bordel!

The European Union has been actively involved in Iraq's post-ISIS reconstruction, focusing on Security Sector Reform (SSR) through the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM). Established in 2017, EUAM aims to support the Iraqi government in reforming its security institu-tions, enhancing civilian oversight, and promoting the rule of law. The EU's approach emphasizes a "soft power" strategy, focusing on capacity building, training, and advisory support.

However, the EU's efforts have faced challenges. Political obstruction by PMF-affiliated parties within the Iraqi parliament has slowed progress, limiting the EU's ability to transform its tech-nical assistance into meaningful reform on the ground شفق نيوز. Despite these hurdles,

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

the EU con-tinues to advocate for a balanced approach that complements U.S. efforts by focusing on institu-tional capacity building and promoting inclusive governance. While the United States focuses on countering Iranian influence and ensuring Iraq's alignment with Western security interests, the European Union emphasizes institutional reform and capacity building. Together, these approaches aim to create a more stable and sovereign Iraq. The U.S. pro-vides security assistance and counterterrorism support, while the EU contributes to long-term in-stitutional development and governance reforms. Despite differing methodologies, both actors recognize the importance of a unified and effective Iraqi state in promoting regional stability.

In summary, the evolving dynamics of the PMF, U.S. legislative influence, and EU SSR initiatives illustrate the complex interplay of national sovereignty, regional influence, and international co-operation in Iraq's security sector. The challenges faced by both the U.S. and EU underscore the need for a coordinated and nuanced approach to support Iraq's path toward a stable and sovereign future.

The EU's Security Sector Reform (SSR) program in Iraq, primarily executed through the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM Iraq), aims to support the Iraqi authorities in implementing civilian security sector reforms. While the program has made significant strides, several areas require improvement to enhance coherence and effectiveness. Measuring the success of Security Sector Reform (SSR) programs involves evaluating various indicators that reflect improvements in security, governance, and institutional capacity. Here are some key metrics and methods to consider:

Key metrics for measuring Security Sector Reform (SSR) success encompass institutional capaci-ty and performance, governance and accountability, public perception and trust, security and sta-bility, and coordination and coherence. Institutional capacity and performance can be evaluated through the training and development of personnel, improvements in operational effectiveness, and the implementation of new policies, procedures, and organizational structures. Governance and accountability involve increasing transparency in security sector operations and budgeting, establishing and ensuring the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms, and reducing reported cases of corruption. Public perception and trust are gauged through changes in public confidence in se-curity institutions and the level of community involvement in security-related decision-making. Security and stability are measured by reductions in crime rates, the effectiveness of conflict reso-lution mechanisms, and adherence to human rights standards by security forces. Coordination and coherence focus on improved inter-agency cooperation and the alignment of donor-funded pro-jects with national priorities.

Methods for evaluation include conducting baseline and follow-up assessments at regular inter-vals to measure progress, developing comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks with specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound indicators, and using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, and statistical analysis. Independent audits and reviews conducted by impartial evaluators further en-sure objectivity, while regular feedback from government officials, security personnel, civil socie-ty, and the general public provides critical insights. By systematically applying these metrics and methods, SSR programs can be

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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effectively evaluated, ensuring that they achieve their intended goals and contribute to long-term security and stability.

Measuring the success of SSR programs is inherently challenging due to several common pitfalls. A lack of clear objectives can make it difficult to measure progress, highlighting the importance of establishing specific, measurable goals from the outset. Inadequate baseline data complicates assessments over time, necessitating thorough initial evaluations. Overemphasis on quantitative metrics risks overlooking qualitative aspects such as public perception and trust, making a bal-anced approach essential. Focusing solely on short-term achievements can obscure long-term im-pacts, while insufficient stakeholder involvement can result in biased or incomplete assessments. Contextual insensitivity may render evaluation methods inaccurate if local political, cultural, and social factors are ignored. Failing to account for unintended consequences can skew perceptions of success, and lack of coordination among donors can lead to fragmented efforts. Irregular or incon-sistent data collection introduces inaccuracies, while political and security instability may disrupt the reform process. Addressing these challenges requires strategies that combine rigorous evalua-tion with flexibility, inclusivity, and contextual awareness.

Implementing a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program for Shia mili-tias in Iraq in exchange for renewed diplomatic engagement with Tehran presents significant man-agerial challenges. Navigating the complex political landscape among Iraq, Iran, and other region-al actors necessitates a robust diplomatic framework to ensure all parties are committed. Coherent coordination among international and local stakeholders, including the Iraqi government, Shia militias, and donors, requires a centralized body to oversee the DDR process. Security concerns during disarmament and demobilization must be addressed through peacekeeping forces and se-cure demobilization sites. Economic and social reintegration of former combatants is critical to preventing recidivism, demanding comprehensive programs that include vocational training, edu-cation, and psychosocial support. The short-term disarmament and demobilization phases may take six to twelve months depending on the scale, while full reintegration and stabilization could span three to five years. Initial costs for disarmament and demobilization are estimated at $100 million to $200 million, with long-term reintegration requiring an additional $300 million to $500 million over several years.

Preparing the EU delegation through the SSR program involves several focused actions. Strength-ening institutional capacity entails enhancing the ability of local institutions to manage DDR pro-cesses through targeted training and resource allocation, which improves local ownership and sus-tainability. Building partnerships with Iraqi authorities, local communities, and international or-ganizations enhances coordination and coherence in implementing DDR and SSR initiatives. De-veloping comprehensive, context-specific DDR plans ensures alignment with broader SSR objec-tives, addressing both immediate security needs and long-term development goals. Ensuring donor coordination through regular communication mechanisms reduces duplication and increases effi-ciency in resource utilization. Implementing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks allows continuous tracking of progress and adaptation of strategies. By addressing these challenges and preparing effectively, the EU delegation can play a pivotal role in the successful

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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implementation of DDR for Shia militias, contributing to regional stability and improved diplomatic relations with Tehran.

Iran faces a complex set of strategic challenges that cut across political, economic, military, and regional dimensions, shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures. Internally, political fragmentation and economic fragility create persistent governance challenges. Factional competi-tion among the presidency, the parliament, the judiciary, and the Revolutionary Guard limits co-herent policy implementation, while widespread public dissatisfaction over inflation, unemploy-ment, and corruption constrains domestic stability.

Economically, Iran is constrained by long-standing sanctions regimes, which restrict access to international financial systems, foreign investment, and technology transfers. Dependence on hy-drocarbon exports makes the economy vulnerable to fluctuations in global energy prices, while insufficient diversification hampers resilience and innovation. Inflation and currency volatility exacerbate social discontent, feeding into broader political grievances.

Militarily, Iran balances the need to maintain credible deterrence capabilities with the costs of projecting power regionally. Its asymmetric strategy—relying on proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—enhances influence but risks entanglement in protracted conflicts and exposes Teh-ran to retaliation from state and non-state adversaries. Missile development programs, naval de-ployments in the Gulf and Red Sea, and support for regional militias also strain defense budgets.

Regionally, Iran contends with a hostile strategic environment characterized by the presence of U.S. forces, competitive Gulf actors, and rising powers such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Its influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen is a source of both leverage and vulnerability, as regional allies may act independently or shift allegiances under external pressure. The Persian Gulf itself remains a potential flashpoint, with the Strait of Hormuz as both a strategic asset and a liability in the face of maritime security threats.

Diplomatically, Iran must navigate isolation and mistrust in multilateral fora while attempting to build alliances that counterbalance U.S. and allied influence. Engagements like the Hormuz Peace Endeavor seek to project a cooperative image, but skepticism from Gulf states and Western pow-ers limits effectiveness. The country's nuclear ambitions and enrichment activities further com-plicate relations, as they trigger sanctions, constrain diplomacy, and generate international ten-sions.

Finally, demographic pressures—including a youthful population, urbanization, and rising social expectations—place additional demands on governance, economic opportunity creation, and so-cial services. Failure to manage these pressures could exacerbate domestic instability, undermine foreign policy objectives, and constrain Iran's long-term strategic autonomy. In sum, Iran's strategic challenges are deeply interconnected: domestic economic and political vulnerabilities, constrained military options, complex regional entanglements, and diplomatic isolation collectively shape its strategic calculus, requiring careful balancing between assertion and accommodation in both regional and international arenas.

19.0 Operation Roaring Lion

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Operation Roaring Lion has struck the heart of Iran's missile and military apparatus with precision and purpose. It does not seek the ruin of a regime, but the restraint of ambition. Long-range missile sites, once proud sentinels of power, lie diminished. Air defenses and weapons production centers have felt the measured hand of consequence. The operation speaks to the world that strength, when tempered by reason, commands respect. Iran has vowed retaliation, and the echo of its words carries threat across the land. Yet threats alone cannot erase the weight of careful strategy.

Proxies in distant lands watch, poised between defiance and caution. Airspace closures mark the vigilance of those who now guard their skies. The risk of escalation simmers, restrained but undeniable. Maritime arteries, vital and vulnerable, remind all that power flows in many currents. Proxy networks may awaken, stirring unrest with subtle, unseen hands. The strikes have disrupted negotiations yet have not ended the quest for accord. Talks mediated by Oman now bear the shadow of the recent storm. Progress is slowed, but not denied, for even the longest night yields to dawn. The operation asserts that diplomacy has its limits, and consequence its voice.

The United States Israel has planned for months for the operation, which is of limited nature and aimed at shaping the environment to weaken Iran at the negotiation table. They are nominally accompanied by calls for regime change, and hold leverage, not as tyrants, but as guardians of stability. Iran faces a choice: stubborn defiance or cautious engagement. Hardliners may rally behind the banner of resistance, yet even they feel the weight of reality. National pride and patriotic fervor stir in response to the foreign hand. Moderates must navigate treacherous currents, their influence challenged.

The joint U.S.–Israel operation was planned months in advance with close coordination between Washington and Jerusalem. The U.S. administration debated the scope of action, weighing limited strikes against broader campaigns with higher risks. Military leadership presented multiple options, including targeted strikes on missile sites or even leadership decapitation scenarios. Pentagon officials voiced caution over logistical challenges, depleted munitions, and potential U.S. casualties. Strategic risk assessments favored strikes that would degrade Iran's capabilities without provoking full regime collapse. Diplomatic efforts continued in parallel, as the White House urged Iran to negotiate nuclear and missile concessions.

Figure Targets struck by US-Israeli Strikes

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Officials discussed whether objectives should focus on tactical military degradation or extend to political disruption of the regime. Target selection reflected a balance between achieving military effect and limiting escalation risk. Messaging to domestic and international audiences emphasized deterrence while signaling the continuation of diplomatic options. Ultimately, the final strikes represented a compromise between military caution, allied coordination, and the desire to maintain leverage at the negotiating table.

The joint U.S. and Israeli strikes have targeted multiple locations across Iran, including major urban centers. Tehran, the capital, has experienced explosions near key government infrastructure. Facilities associated with Iran's leadership, including compounds linked to the Supreme Leader, were reportedly hit. Intelligence headquarters and other regime-related buildings in Tehran were also targeted. Approximately 30 distinct sites have been struck in the initial phase of the operation. Military installations perceived as threats to U.S. and Israeli security were included among the targets. Weapons production and missile-related facilities are believed to have been affected. The strikes aim to weaken Iran's offensive and strategic capabilities without triggering full-scale regime collapse. Details on the full scope and impact of each target are still emerging. Overall, the operation represents a precise campaign against both leadership and military nodes to maximize strategic leverage.

Yet asymmetric power remains within Iran's grasp, through proxies and the Strait of Hormuz. Economic tremors ripple through the land, whispering that survival demands prudence. Energy markets, restless and sensitive, bear witness to the uncertainty of conflict. The operation's restraint demonstrates clarity of purpose: to weaken without annihilating. Retaliation, while feared, is tempered by the knowledge of consequence. Iran's nuclear ambitions remain a challenge, yet one framed by opportunity and peril alike. Western powers have shown that words alone cannot shape destiny; action is needed. The Iranian people may rally behind their leaders, yet the truth of strain is felt in every home. Hardliners consolidate power, but even their strength has limits. Non-compliance carries weight, and its consequences are tangible. Even diminished, Iran wields asymmetric levers, testing resolve across borders. The strikes reset expectations, reminding all that fortune favors the prepared. Balance hangs in the air, delicate as the edge of a blade. Vulnerabilities, once hidden, are now exposed for all to see. Neighboring nations recalibrate, measuring their own positions in this shifting tide. Negotiations, though strained, are not extinguished; they endure in the shadow of action. The future depends on judgment, courage, and the willingness to act with wisdom. The people's hearts, stirred by pride and fear, may shape the course of choice. Ultimately, Operation Roaring Lion wields both sword and olive branch, pressing the hour while leaving the path of diplomacy open.

Summary

Operation Roaring **Lion** has *limited but targeted* military effects designed to weaken Iran's offensive capabilities while avoiding immediate regime collapse. The strikes complicate but do not end Oman-mediated nuclear and diplomatic talks. They increase diplomatic leverage for the U.S. and allies by raising the costs of continued Iranian intransigence, but can also be used by Tehran to justify resistance and rally internal support**.** Internal Iranian dynamics may strengthen hardliners and reduce appetite for compromise — but economic strain and external

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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pressure could also *eventually tilt leverage back toward diplomacy* if the regime calculates its survival depends on negotiations.

RENVOI - TOWARDS A PAX EUROPEANA IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

A US-China-EU sponsored conference on the Middle East would provide a unique multilateral platform to address the region's complex security, economic, and political challenges. Unlike purely regional initiatives, such a format could combine the diplomatic weight, economic lever-age, and normative influence of the three major global actors, creating incentives for meaningful commitments from regional stakeholders. The presence of the United States would lend strategic reassurance to key security partners, while China's participation would emphasize economic de-velopment and infrastructure investment as tools for stability. The European Union could contrib-ute a normative framework grounded in rule of law, human rights, and multilateral cooperation, bridging gaps between regional actors and global norms.

Such a conference could serve as a venue to reconcile competing interests, manage rivalries, and coordinate responses to transnational threats, including terrorism, irregular migration, and cli-mate-related crises. It would allow for the alignment of development aid, trade policies, and secu-rity assistance under a coherent, coordinated framework, reducing duplication and fostering long-term planning. Importantly, the sponsorship of major global powers could strengthen the legitima-cy of agreements and encourage compliance, while simultaneously empowering regional actors to take ownership of the outcomes. By promoting dialogue between global powers and Middle East-ern states, the conference would also provide a structured mechanism to mitigate external compe-tition, reduce the risk of proxy conflicts, and identify shared priorities in energy, infrastructure, and governance.

We signal it has be resolved to publish a EU Middle East strategy to coincide with a strengthening of LAS, so long as the Middle East remain a heavy lift. There are the long-term consequences of Turkey acceeding to the EU. Even so, it is matter of some importance that also the region articu-lates its input during this order-building moment in the Middle East following the strike on Iran, and do not rely on a US-led balance of power or for that sake the professional incompetence, insti-tutional racism and lack of leadership, proto-fascistic fin de regne opportunists of the self-serving scoundrels, faraonic pussy whipped freewheeling sociopaths and nationalistic clique of the Danish Secret and Intelligence Service. Enter also the Baghdad-conference. Shall we shed a light on that ?

In essence, a US-China-EU sponsored conference would not replace region-led initiatives but complement them, creating a hybrid governance model that integrates global resources with re-gional ownership. It could transform episodic diplomacy into sustained, actionable strategies that enhance security, economic integration, and political stability across the Middle East, while sig-naling to both regional and international audiences that cooperative, multilateral solutions are both possible and necessary.

From my perspective, this would involve creating a set of principles for a Pax Europeana in the Middle East , a framework that promotes peace, stability, and cooperation in the region,

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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inspired by European values and experiences. There are 12 principles that could guide such an initiative:

1. Inclusive Dialogue: Foster open and inclusive dialogue among all regional stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and minority groups.
2. Respect for Sovereignty: Uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states in the region.
3. Human Rights: Promote and protect human rights, including freedom of expression, religion, and assembly.
4. Rule of Law: Strengthen the rule of law and ensure fair and impartial justice systems.
5. Economic Cooperation: Encouraging economic cooperation and integration to increase regional development and reduce poverty.
6. Conflict Resolution: Developing mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution and mediation.
7. Cultural Exchange: Promotion of cultural exchange and mutual understanding to bridge divides and build trust.
8. Environmental Sustainability: Addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable development practices.
9. Security Cooperation: Increasing regional security cooperation to combat terrorism, organized crime, and other security threats.
10. Education and innovation: Invest in education and innovation to empower young people and foster economic growth.
11. Good Governance: Support transparent, accountable, and participatory governance.
12. Regional Integration: Work towards greater regional integration and cooperation, inspired by the European Union model.

These principles aim to create a foundation for lasting peace and prosperity in the Middle East, drawing on the lessons and successes of European integration and cooperation.

Here's an enhanced, expanded, and fully integrated version of your implementation plan with bul-lets and numbers removed, flowing narrative, and added strategic depth:

Implementing the principles of a "Pax Europeana" in the Middle East presents formidable chal-lenges that must be addressed with nuanced strategies and sustained engagement. Political insta-bility in several countries undermines long-term planning and regional cooperation, while histori-cal conflicts, such as the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, embed deep-seated mistrust that resists rapid resolution. The region's diversity of political, religious, and ethnic actors creates complex layers of interest, often pulling in conflicting directions. Economic disparities between and within coun-tries exacerbate tensions and complicate collaborative efforts, and the presence of authoritarian regimes can constrain initiatives aimed at promoting human rights, rule of law, and accountable governance. External influences from global powers such as the United States, Russia, and Europe further complicate regional dynamics, while competition over critical resources, particularly wa-ter and hydrocarbons, continues to generate friction. Ongoing security threats from terrorism, in-surgencies, and regional conflicts divert attention and resources from peace-building, and cultural and religious differences can impede mutual understanding. In addition, inadequate infrastructure

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

and weak institutions undermine the effective implementation of long-term projects, while public skepticism toward externally initiated initiatives may limit support and engagement.

Addressing these challenges requires a multiphase approach, grounded in both regional and inter-national cooperation and sustained commitment. The first phase focuses on foundation building through stakeholder engagement, establishing dialogue platforms that include governments, NGOs, civil society, religious leaders, and international organizations. Building trust through con-fidence-building measures, such as joint cultural and educational programs, is central to creating a durable foundation. Comprehensive needs assessments should evaluate political, economic, social, and security requirements, guiding the development of strategic plans tailored to each principle and local context. Establishing regional councils or committees and formalizing legal agreements and treaties provide the institutional framework necessary for oversight and accountability.

Table

Implementation entails advancing political and security cooperation, with mediation and arbitra-tion bodies resolving ongoing conflicts, and forming regional security alliances to combat terror-ism and organized crime. Economic integration is fostered through trade agreements and regional infrastructure projects, including transportation and energy networks. Human rights and govern-ance initiatives are supported by independent monitoring bodies and reforms promoting transpar-ency and accountability, alongside anti-corruption measures. Capacity building emphasizes educa-tion, innovation, and cultural exchange, with student and academic exchanges, the creation of in-novation hubs and incubators, and media

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

collaboration to promote mutual understanding. Joint environmental projects address challenges such as water scarcity and desertification, while sus-tainable practices are promoted across agriculture and industry. Monitoring and evaluation are critical to adaptive implementation, with regular progress reports, feedback mechanisms from stakeholders and the public, and strategies ready to adjust to evolving circumstances. Long-term sustainability is ensured by institutionalizing permanent bodies, foster-ing deeper regional integration inspired by the European Union model, and engaging local com-munities through awareness campaigns and inclusive decision-making.

Neighboring countries play a pivotal role by providing diplomatic support, acting as mediators, and leveraging their influence to facilitate dialogue. Economic cooperation through trade partner-ships and investment in infrastructure fosters regional stability, while joint security initiatives and intelligence sharing enhance collective resilience. Humanitarian support, including refugee assis-tance and crisis response, builds goodwill and strengthens social cohesion. Cultural and educa-tional exchanges cultivate mutual understanding, while collaboration on environmental sustaina-bility ensures shared natural resources are managed responsibly. Political and institutional sup-port, including governance reforms and regional integration efforts, consolidates the foundations for a cooperative regional order.

Financing a Pax Europeana requires leveraging diverse funding sources and financial instruments. International contributions from the European Union, including the EU budget and European In-vestment Bank, alongside United Nations support through peacekeeping and development pro-grams, form the backbone of financial sustainability. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund can provide grants, low-interest loans, and technical assistance. Bilateral and multilateral aid from government partnerships, development agencies, regional organizations, and coalitions of willing states amplifies resources, while public-private partnerships, corporate social responsibil-ity initiatives, and impact investing mobilize private sector engagement. Philanthropic contribu-tions through foundations, NGOs, and global campaigns further supplement funding, comple-mented by regional and local financing from national budgets, community fundraising, and micro-finance. Innovative instruments such as green bonds, social impact bonds, and development im-pact bonds provide targeted investment in environmentally sustainable and socially impactful pro-jects.

Transparent governance ensures accountability, with oversight committees, regular audits, and published financial reports safeguarding funds. Capacity building through training programs and technical assistance enhances local expertise in financial management and project execution. By strategically mobilizing these diverse mechanisms, the EU and regional partners can implement and sustain a Pax Europeana, creating a stable, prosperous, and cooperative Middle East. The ini-tiative, while complex and ambitious, is anchored in the EU's commitment to long-term engage-ment, resilience, and influence. The EU is present, determined to remain, and capable of shaping a more secure and integrated regional future.

Pax Americana in the Middle East refers to the strategic order shaped by U.S. dominance since the mid-20th century, particularly after World War II. Its core elements include:

- Military hegemony: U.S. bases, arms sales, and security guarantees, especially to Gulf monar-chies and Israel.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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- Economic influence: Control over oil markets via partnerships with OPEC states and the petro-dollar system.
- Diplomatic architecture: Bilateral alliances, peace-brokering (e.g. Camp David, Abraham Ac-cords), and containment of adversaries like Iran.
- Normative projection: Promotion of liberal democracy, counterterrorism, and human rights—often inconsistently applied.
- Institutional void: Absence of a regional security framework, replaced by ad hoc coalitions and U.S.-led interventions.

Pax Sinica, by contrast, is China's emerging model of influence, rooted in economic statecraft and non-interference. In the Middle East, its elements include:

- Infrastructure diplomacy: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments in ports, railways, and energy corridors.
- Strategic neutrality: Engagement with rivals (e.g. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel) without choosing sides.
- Economic interdependence: Growing trade, tech partnerships, and yuan-based oil transactions.
- Diplomatic brokerage: Recent mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia signals a shift toward conflict resolution.
- Normative restraint: Avoidance of ideological imposition, favoring regime stability over liber-al reform.

Interaction between the two could unfold in several ways:

- Competitive coexistence: U.S. security dominance persists while China deepens economic en-tanglements, creating a bifurcated order.
- Strategic decoupling: As U.S. influence wanes, China may fill vacuums—especially in post-conflict reconstruction and digital infrastructure.
- Hybrid governance: Regional actors leverage both powers to diversify dependencies, balancing military aid from Washington with investment from Beijing.
- Normative friction: U.S. liberal norms clash with China's sovereignty-first ethos, especially in arenas like digital surveillance, human rights, and governance models.

In essence, Pax Americana is rooted in coercive stability; Pax Sinica in transactional equilibrium. Their interaction will hinge on whether Middle Eastern states seek autonomy through multipolari-ty or remain tethered to legacy alliances. When Pax Americana, Pax Sinica, and Pax Europeana converge in the Middle East, the result is not a unified order but a layered, often contradictory mosaic of influence. Each power projects a distinct vision of stability:

Pax Americana remains rooted in hard power, bilateral security guarantees, and normative liber-alism.

Pax Sinica offers infrastructural entanglement, strategic ambiguity, and sovereignty-first diplo-macy.

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Pax Europeana, by contrast, is subtler—anchored in multilateralism, normative persuasion, and technocratic governance.

Europe's imprint in the region is shaped by:

- Regulatory diplomacy: EU norms on trade, migration, digital governance, and environmental standards.
- Developmental aid: Conditional assistance tied to human rights, institutional reform, and civil society.
- Multilateral engagement: Support for UN frameworks, regional dialogues, and conflict media-tion.
- Cultural capital: Historical ties, educational exchanges, and soft power through language, me-dia, and diaspora networks.

When combined, these three "Paxes" do not harmonize—they interact through tension, triangula-tion, and selective convergence. For instance:

- Gulf monarchies may anchor their security in Washington, their infrastructure in Beijing, and their regulatory modernization in Brussels.
- Fragile states like Lebanon or Yemen may receive humanitarian aid from Europe, reconstruc-tion bids from China, and counterterrorism support from the U.S.—each with divergent condition-alities.
- Regional blocs (e.g. the Arab League) may exploit this multipolarity to assert autonomy, craft-ing hybrid governance models that borrow from all three without submitting to any.

The deeper question is whether these overlapping orders produce resilience or fragmentation. Pax Americana enforces; Pax Sinica enables; Pax Europeana persuades. Their interaction could either entrench elite bargains or empower pluralistic reform—depending on how local actors navigate the space between coercion, capital, and norms.

Source: https://www.rome-museum.com/ara-pacis.php

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CONCLUSIONS

Regional dynamics are central to the security dilemmas of Persian Gulf states because the Gulf operates as a compressed geopolitical system in which domestic fragility, regime competition, and external intervention intersect. First, the enduring rivalry between Iran and several Arab Gulf monarchies generates a structural security dilemma, reinforced by asymmetric warfare doctrines, missile proliferation, and the use of non-state actors. Second, unresolved conflicts in Iraq and Yemen create porous security perimeters, enabling militia networks, arms flows, and maritime threats to spill into Gulf waters. Third, the Gulf's strategic centrality to global energy markets internationalises its security environment: extra-regional powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and increasingly India and European states maintain varying forms of military or econom-ic presence, thereby embedding the region within wider great-power competition. Finally, eco-nomic diversification pressures under post-oil transition strategies introduce new vulnerabili-ties—cybersecurity risks, infrastructure exposure, maritime chokepoints, and supply-chain de-pendence—which expand the definition of "security" beyond traditional military threats.

Within this environment, the European Union plays a stabilising, albeit indirect, role primarily through economic statecraft and regulatory influence rather than hard security projection. The EU is a major trading partner for Gulf states and a key destination for energy exports, but its leverage lies less in defence guarantees and more in structured economic partnerships. Through trade agreements, energy cooperation, green transition financing, maritime security initiatives, and technical assistance in customs, border management, and financial regulation, the EU contributes to institutional resilience. Its engagement often focuses on rule-based frameworks, regulatory convergence, and capacity-building—tools that reduce systemic vulnerabilities and strengthen governance. In addition, EU diplomatic engagement with Iraq, Iran (including nuclear diplomacy), and the GCC supports de-escalation mechanisms that indirectly benefit Gulf stability. In this sense, the EU's comparative advantage lies in shaping the political economy of security rather than in projecting coercive force.

The integration of diverse stakeholder perspectives is essential because Gulf security challenges are multi-layered and cannot be addressed solely through state-centric military approaches. Effec-tive policy outcomes require coordination among defence establishments, energy ministries, fi-nancial regulators, port authorities, private infrastructure operators, technology firms, and civil society actors. For example, maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz is not only a naval issue but also a matter of shipping insurance, port logistics, energy pricing, and environmental protec-tion. Similarly, countering hybrid threats requires alignment between intelligence services, cyber agencies, telecommunications regulators, and private-sector operators of critical infrastructure. Inclusive policy design reduces blind spots, enhances legitimacy, and improves implementation capacity.

From a governance perspective—consistent with your interest in structured strategic units and partnership frameworks—the region would benefit from institutionalised platforms that connect security policy with economic planning and regulatory coordination. Multi-stakeholder forums, track-two dialogues, and joint task forces linking Gulf states with external partners such as the EU can transform fragmented threat responses into integrated

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

resilience strategies. Ultimately, dura-ble security in the Persian Gulf will depend not only on balancing power but on embedding re-gional competition within cooperative economic and institutional frameworks that lower incen-tives for escalation while increasing the costs of instability. In conclusion, the analyses carried out reveal that regional dynamics significantly contribute to the security challenges faced by Persian Gulf nations. Factors such as sectarian divides, historical rivalries, and geopolitical interests of external powers create a complex security environment that exacerbates tensions and conflicts in the region. Consequently, these dynamics complicate the efforts of individual nations to maintain stability and develop effective security strategies.

Regional dynamics are central to the Persian Gulf's complex security environment. Persistent ge-opolitical rivalries, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, shape military postures, proxy conflicts, and regional alignments. Sectarian divisions, historical disputes, and competing territo-rial claims further exacerbate tensions, while intra-GCC divergences—such as the 2017–2021 Qa-tar diplomatic crisis—illustrate that collective security mechanisms are often undermined by bi-lateral grievances. The strategic importance of chokepoints, most notably the Strait of Hormuz, magnifies the vulnerability of Gulf states to maritime disruptions, energy supply shocks, and ex-ternal interventions. Additionally, non-state actors, including militias and terrorist organisations, exploit these fault lines, increasing the complexity of security management. These intertwined regional dynamics create a multi-layered security challenge, where threats are simultaneously internal, interstate, and transnational, requiring nuanced and flexible responses.

The European Union leverages economic partnerships as a tool to promote stability and resilience in the Gulf region. By facilitating trade, investment, and energy cooperation, the EU creates inter-dependencies that can reduce incentives for conflict and enhance collective prosperity. Initiatives in renewable energy, digital connectivity, and infrastructure development are framed not merely as economic projects but as instruments of strategic stabilisation, supporting governance, institu-tional capacity, and resilience against external shocks. Moreover, EU funding and technical assis-tance in areas such as border management, maritime security, and crisis preparedness help Gulf states address security challenges without direct military engagement, reinforcing a model of soft power and normative influence. Through its multi-bilateral approach—combining GCC-level engagement with targeted partnerships with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and other Gulf states—the EU positions itself as both an economic and diplomatic stabiliser in the region.

Integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives—ranging from national governments and regional organisations to civil society, private sector actors, and local communities—enhances the effec-tiveness of security policies in the Gulf by ensuring that strategies are contextually informed and politically feasible. Multi-stakeholder engagement allows for early identification of emerging risks, more comprehensive threat assessments, and the design of policies that balance competing priorities. For instance, combining Gulf state security interests with EU economic and normative priorities can yield policies that simultaneously enhance stability, incentivise reform, and strengthen regional governance. Furthermore, inclusive dialogue fosters trust-building, reduces misperceptions, and provides channels for mediation and conflict resolution. By embedding di-verse perspectives into security planning, the EU and Gulf partners can produce more resilient, adaptable, and broadly supported

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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security frameworks capable of addressing both conventional and non-traditional threats The European Union plays a crucial role in supporting regional security through economic partnerships. By fostering trade relations and investment opportunities, the EU not only helps bolster the economies of Gulf nations but also encourages cooperation on shared security concerns. This economic engagement creates incentives for collaboration, thereby enhancing stability and reducing the likelihood of conflict. Our asks from Baghdad: (1) UFM & Irak Rapprochement via the PEM Convention (2) MSC to operate the Faw port (3) Oil and gas to keep flowing (4) Leadership on Shia-Sunni reconciliation (5) Development of trade and FDI relationship.

Furthermore, the integration of diverse stakeholder perspectives is essential for formulating effective security policy outcomes in the region. Engaging different national actors, civil society, and international partners in the dialogue ensures that various viewpoints and interests are considered. This inclusive approach promotes mutual understanding and trust, enabling the development of comprehensive strategies that address the intricacies of the security landscape in the Persian Gulf. Ultimately, fostering collaboration among all stakeholders could lead to more resilient security frameworks that contribute to lasting peace and stability in the region.

The 2022 Joint Communication on a Strategic Partnership with the Gulf can be read not only as a forward-looking policy framework but also as a displacement for the stagnation that had charac-terised EU relations with the Gulf's "big three": Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. By framing the Gulf as a strategic neighbourhood and highlighting the GCC as a regional interlocutor, the Communica-tion sought to create a conceptual anchor for EU action; yet, in practice, it masked the EU's lim-ited traction in shaping the political and security agendas of the region's most influential actors. Saudi Arabia's assertive bilateral posture, Iraq's internal fragility, and Iran's adversarial position-ing reveal the structural constraints that the EU faces in achieving coherent, unified engagement. While the document facilitated dialogue and offered a multi-sectoral rationale for EU presence, it did not resolve the fundamental challenge of reconciling bilateral divergences with a regional strategy.

Moving forward, the EU's relationship with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and the GCC collectively can only achieve coherence through a deliberate, differentiated, and coordinated multi-bilateral architecture. With Saudi Arabia, the EU must deepen high-level political and economic partner-ships while recognising the Kingdom's role as a system-shaping actor in regional security and energy markets. We have opted to proceed by means of stabilization of Iraq and Yemen in order to allow the informal foreign policy dialogue between the Gulfis in a GCC+1 format to be launched, the outline of which is a major contribution of this essay. Engagement with Iraq should remain focused on stabilisation, institution-building, and mediation, framing Baghdad as a bridge actor between Gulf and Iranian dynamics. Iran's inclusion must remain conditional, combining norma-tive pressure, diplomatic channels, and selective cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as energy security and maritime safety, to avoid strategic exclusion undermining the EU's credibil-ity.

Institutionally, the GCC Secretariat should be leveraged to coordinate multilateral dialogue and standardise procedures, while also accommodating the EU's bilateral initiatives with individual member states. Coherence can further be enhanced through state-specific action

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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plans that inte-grate trade, security, normative commitments, and climate-energy objectives, linked by a clear overarching EU Gulf strategy. Importantly, the EU should adopt monitoring and review mecha-nisms, with periodic evaluations of progress on shared objectives and conflict-sensitive risk as-sessments. By combining structured bilateralism, regional coordination, and normatively ground-ed conditionality, the EU can transform the 3 + 1 framework into a strategically coherent, resili-ent, and credible regional posture, capable of aligning its interests with those of the Gulf's prin-cipal actors while maintaining the flexibility to respond to evolving geopolitical dynamics.

To match the scale of Chinese and Gulf investments in Iraq, Baghdad must first establish a stable and secure political environment, consolidating governance, enhancing state capacity, and imple-menting effective anti-corruption measures. Second, it must reform and modernize its regulatory, legal, and investment frameworks, creating transparent, predictable, and investor-friendly condi-tions that reduce risk and ensure fair competition. Third, Baghdad should prioritize high-impact strategic sectors and infrastructure projects, signaling both immediate economic returns and long-term developmental vision, while coordinating closely with local stakeholders to ensure sustaina-bility and social buy-in.

The conditions under which the EU would re-engage earnestly in Iraq include comprehensive in-stitutional reforms aligned with EU governance standards, adherence to transparency, rule of law, and human rights principles, and guarantees of investment protection. Furthermore, the EU would likely require active participation in multilateral reconstruction and development initiatives, clear strategic alignment with EU foreign policy objectives, and measurable progress in political and economic stabilization before committing substantial financial or technical resources.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of our findings highlight several key areas for further exploration within the context of security studies and international relations.

1. Regional Security Complex Theory: The findings underscore the relevance of the Regional Security Complex Theory, suggesting that the Persian Gulf nations cannot be understood in isolation due to their interconnected security dynamics. The interactions between states, as well as non-state actors and external influences, necessitate an analysis that considers regional complexities. This theoretical framework can be expanded to incorporate the unique characteristics of the Persian Gulf, providing a more nuanced understanding of intraregional relationships and their impact on security.

2. Constructivist Perspectives: The role of identity and historical narratives in shaping security policies is evident from the findings. Constructivist theories emphasize that security threats are socially constructed through shared beliefs, cultural histories, and national identities. The impact of sectarian divides and historical rivalries highlighted in our analysis suggests that there is a need to incorporate constructivist perspectives into theoretical frameworks to better explain the behavior of states in the Persian Gulf.

3. Economic Interdependence and Security: The findings indicate that economic partnerships, particularly with external actors like the European Union, can enhance security through

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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increased interdependence. This aligns with liberal theories that emphasize the role of economic cooperation in promoting peace. Future research can explore how these economic ties can be leveraged to create more robust security arrangements in the region, advancing theories that connect economic interdependence with stability.

4. Multilateralism and Inclusive Governance: Our analysis points to the necessity of integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives for effective security policy outcomes. This reinforces theories advocating for multilateral approaches and inclusive governance in conflict resolution. The findings suggest that establishing platforms for dialogue among various stakeholders can mitigate tensions and enhance cooperative security measures, providing a basis for theories that emphasize collaboration in international relations.

5. Impact of External Powers: The influence of external powers in regional dynamics raises questions about balance-of-power theories. The findings suggest that the strategies employed by external actors, such as the EU, can significantly shape the security landscape in the Persian Gulf. Research could focus on how external engagement affects power dynamics among regional states and impacts stability.

Overall, these theoretical implications highlight the need for further inquiry into the interconnections between regional security dynamics, identity politics, economic relationships, and inclusive governance frameworks in the context of the Persian Gulf.

Further research

Further research in the realm of Persian Gulf security can explore a variety of critical areas to deepen the understanding and address ongoing challenges. Here are some suggestions:

1. Impact of External Influences: Investigating the roles of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China in shaping the security dynamics of the Persian Gulf. Research could focus on how their strategic interests and military presence affect regional stability and influence intra-regional relationships.

2. Economic Integration Models: Analyzing case studies of economic partnerships between the EU and Gulf nations to uncover best practices and lessons learned. Future studies could evaluate the effectiveness of economic interdependence in reducing conflict and enhancing regional cooperation, as well as explore models for sustainable economic development that align with security goals.

3. Role of Non-State Actors: Exploring the impact of non-state actors, including insurgent groups, militias, and terrorist organizations, on regional security. Research could assess how these entities exploit sectarian divisions and political grievances, and investigate strategies for countering their influence through cooperative security measures.

4. Climate Change and Environmental Security: Investigating how climate change affects security dynamics in the Persian Gulf. Research could focus on water scarcity, environmental degradation, and the region's vulnerability to climate-related incidents, which may exacerbate existing tensions and create new security challenges.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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5. Public Perception and Identity Formation: Examining how public perceptions of identity and historical narratives shape national security policies within Gulf nations. Studies could involve qualitative approaches that explore how cultural factors influence citizens' views on regional cooperation and conflict.

6. Technological Advances: Studying the implications of emerging technologies, such as cyber warfare and unmanned systems, on the security landscape of the Persian Gulf. Research could assess how these technologies may alter traditional security paradigms and the responses of states to these evolving threats.

7. Maritime Security Frameworks: Assessing the efficacy of existing maritime security agreements and frameworks within the Persian Gulf. Further research can examine joint exercises and cooperative initiatives among Gulf nations and external partners to enhance maritime security and address issues such as piracy and smuggling.

8. Crisis Management Mechanisms: Evaluating the effectiveness of crisis management and conflict resolution mechanisms in preventing escalations and finding peaceful solutions in the region. Research may focus on the role of international organizations and regional bodies in mediating disputes among Persian Gulf nations.

Through these avenues of further research, scholars can contribute to a richer understanding of the complexities of Persian Gulf security, offering insights that may inform policy and strategic decision-making aimed at enhancing stability and cooperation in the region.

Counterarguments Addressing Key Issues in Persian Gulf Security Dynamics

The evolving dynamics between the European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are often framed as a pathway to enhanced cooperation and security in the Persian Gulf region. However, several counterarguments challenge the effectiveness and feasibility of these dynamics.

One significant concern is the perception that the EU's engagements with the GCC may primarily serve European interests rather than genuinely address regional needs. Critics argue that the EU's focus on energy security, trade partnerships, and geopolitical strategy can overshadow pressing local issues such as human rights violations, social inequality, and governance deficiencies within GCC states. This disconnect could result in policies that fail to resonate with the local populace, undermining the legitimacy of EU involvement and potentially fostering resentment.

Additionally, the EU's strategic approach is often criticized as inconsistent and reactive rather than proactive. The EU's previous engagements in the region, such as interventions in Libya and attempts to mediate in Syria, have been met with mixed results, leading to skepticism regarding its capability to influence positive change in the Gulf. Critics argue that the EU may lack the necessary leverage and presence required to effectuate substantial progress on critical issues like security cooperation or conflict resolution, questioning whether its involvement can achieve desired outcomes.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Furthermore, the differing political systems and ideologies between the EU and GCC countries pose significant challenges to effective cooperation. The EU champions democratic principles, human rights, and rule of law, while many GCC states maintain authoritarian regimes that often suppress dissent and curtail political freedoms. This fundamental ideological rift can hinder meaningful partnerships and impede the EU's ability to press for necessary reforms without jeopardizing economic and strategic ties, leading to accusations of hypocrisy. Another point of contention is the potential overlap of interests between the EU and competing global powers like China and Russia. As the GCC increasingly engages with these nations for trade, investment, and military partnerships, the EU's influence may dwindle. The GCC's strategic diversification can result in an environment where cooperation with the EU becomes secondary to relationships with other powers that may not prioritize the same values of stability and democratic governance.

Lastly, the fragmented nature of the GCC itself can complicate the EU's engagement strategy. Variations in national interests, political dynamics, and economic conditions among member states can lead to inconsistent responses to EU initiatives and hinder the establishment of a coherent regional framework for partnership. The lack of unity within the GCC may ultimately result in challenges for the EU in crafting effective policies that address both regional and bilateral security concerns.

In summary, while the evolving EU-GCC dynamics present opportunities for collaboration, several counterarguments highlight the potential limitations and challenges inherent in these relationships. Addressing the disconnect between European policies and regional needs, managing inconsistent strategic approaches, navigating ideological differences, responding to external competition, and overcoming GCC fragmentation are all critical issues that must be addressed to ensure a productive partnership moving forward.

Scenarios

Here are several potential scenarios for the Persian Gulf, considering various factors such as geopolitical dynamics, economic interests, and environmental challenges:

Increased Regional Cooperation: In this optimistic scenario, Gulf nations strengthen their economic and security partnerships, facilitated by external powers like the EU. Enhanced dialogue leads to the establishment of effective regional security mechanisms and cooperative initiatives to tackle common threats such as terrorism and maritime security. The increased economic interdependence helps build trust, reducing tensions and fostering a more stable regional environment.

Escalation of Sectarian Conflicts: In contrast, this scenario foresees a deterioration of relations, particularly between Sunni and Shia-majority states, leading to heightened sectarian tensions. Proxy conflicts might intensify, with external powers intervening to support their preferred factions. This escalation could result in open confrontations, increased military expenditures, and a destabilized Gulf region.

Economic Reliance on Renewable Energy: With the global shift toward renewable energy, Gulf states aggressively diversify their economies and invest in sustainable technologies. This transition reduces their reliance on oil exports, subsequently altering regional power

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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dynamics. The Gulf nations could emerge as leaders in renewable energy production, fostering new partnerships with countries prioritizing sustainability.

Environmental Crises and Resource Scarcity: Climate change and resource depletion could significantly impact the region. Water scarcity might lead to increased competition among Gulf nations, potentially igniting conflict over shared resources. Rising temperatures and extreme weather events could disrupt energy production and threaten ecological stability, requiring cooperative efforts for disaster preparedness and response.

Geopolitical Tensions with Great Powers: In this scenario, the rivalry among great powers (US, China, Russia) intensifies, leading to the Persian Gulf as a flashpoint for larger geopolitical confrontations. Strategic military alliances could form, raising the risk of conflict rooted in broader international disputes, impacting the Gulf's security landscape and resulting in a potential arms race.

Shifts in Global Energy Markets: The transition to alternative energy sources may lead to reduced demand for Gulf oil, causing economic instability in the region. Consequently, Gulf states may implement drastic economic reforms and seek new international partnerships to adapt to changing energy landscapes. Nations that fail to diversify could experience political unrest and social turmoil.

Emergence of Non-State Actors: Non-state actors, including transnational terrorist organizations, could gain influence due to political instability and social grievances within the region. The increase in their activities may prompt Gulf nations to adopt more repressive measures, leading to human rights concerns while complicating international relations.

Humanitarian Crises and Regional Instability: Ongoing conflicts, such as in Yemen and Syria, may exacerbate humanitarian crises, resulting in mass migrations and destabilizing neighboring states. Regional nations might struggle to cope with the influx of refugees, leading to social tensions and calls for greater international assistance and cooperation.

Each of these scenarios emphasizes the complex interplay of various factors in shaping the future of the Persian Gulf. Policymakers must consider these potential developments when crafting strategies aimed at promoting stability and security in the region. The implications for strategy and leaps in addressing the future of the Persian Gulf involve various considerations rooted in geopolitical, economic, environmental, and security dimensions. Here is an overview:

Adaptation of Defense Strategies: As geopolitical tensions escalate, Gulf nations may need to revise their defense strategies to prioritize cooperation among allies and enhance their military readiness against potential threats. This could involve increased joint military exercises and collaboration with external powers for defense technology and strategic planning.

Economic Diversification Initiatives: In light of fluctuating global energy markets and the shift towards renewable energy, Gulf states should invest in diversifying their economies. Developing sectors such as technology, tourism, and renewable energy can help mitigate

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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reliance on oil revenues. Public-private partnerships may foster innovation and attract foreign investment.

Strengthening Regional Organizations: The formation and empowerment of regional organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) should be prioritized. By fostering deeper collaboration among member states and establishing effective conflict resolution mechanisms, such organizations can enhance political stability and security cooperation. Focus on Environmental Sustainability: The impact of climate change and resource scarcity necessitates the integration of environmental sustainability into national strategies. Gulf nations must invest in water management, renewable energy projects, and disaster preparedness to address the challenges posed by environmental changes that affect security and livelihoods.

Enhancing Counter-Terrorism Efforts: Given the potential rise of non-state actors, Gulf nations should enhance their counter-terrorism strategies by sharing intelligence and cooperating regionally. Additionally, addressing the underlying social and political grievances that fuel extremism will be crucial in reducing threats from militant groups.

Humanitarian Response Planning: In anticipation of humanitarian crises resulting from conflicts and resource scarcity, Gulf states should develop robust response plans and frameworks for crisis management. Collaborating with international organizations can enhance capacity-building efforts and provide a cohesive approach to refugee support and humanitarian assistance. Leveraging International Partnerships: Engaging with international partners, including Europe, Asia, and the United States, can help Gulf nations navigate complex security challenges. Building strategic partnerships focused on shared interests — such as security, trade, and environmental sustainability — can enhance regional stability.

Investment in Technological Innovation: To remain competitive and address emerging threats, Gulf states should prioritize investments in technological innovation, cybersecurity, and research and development. Such investments can enhance national security and contribute to the overall modernization of their economies. Multilateral Dialogue Initiatives: Promoting multilateral dialogue among regional players, including Iran and Gulf states, can help diffuse tensions and foster a more stable environment. Engagement through diplomatic channels and regional forums may lead to agreements on security cooperation, trade, and resource management. By considering these strategic implications, Gulf nations can proactively address the challenges and opportunities that arise in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Persian Gulf, ensuring a more secure and prosperous future.

Policy Recommendations

The Gulf region faces a complex intersection of security, economic, and governance challenges, requiring coordinated strategies that integrate national priorities with regional and international frameworks. For the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), strengthening regional security necessi-tates a comprehensive framework that unites member states around shared threats. This includes establishing joint counter-terrorism task forces with standardized intelligence-sharing protocols, conducting coordinated maritime patrols to safeguard strategic shipping lanes, and developing rapid response units for crises along land and maritime

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

borders. Economic diversification is equally essential, with targeted investment in renewable energy projects such as large-scale solar and wind initiatives, regional digital infrastructure, fintech hubs, and incubators for technological innovation. Policies that incentivize private-sector participation and foster public-private partner-ships can accelerate knowledge transfer, innovation, and sustainable economic growth. Engaging Iran through structured bilateral and multilateral forums, confidence-building measures, and tech-nical working groups on energy, trade, and nuclear safety can reduce the risk of escalation while establishing transparent mechanisms for resolving territorial and maritime disputes.

In the case of Iraq, national cohesion remains central to addressing structural unemployment, economic fragility, and social tensions. Promoting inclusive political processes that integrate di-verse ethnic and sectarian groups ensures equitable representation and participation in govern-ance. Strengthening institutional capacity is critical, including technical support for robust public administration, improved management of essential services, and enhanced anti-corruption frame-works. Energy sector stability remains a core priority, necessitating both diversification of energy sources and sustainable development of oil production, alongside investments in alternative ener-gy initiatives. Engagement with international partners, particularly the European Union, provides Iraq with a pathway to reinforce governance, attract investment, and enhance labor market out-comes. The EU's support through technical assistance, capacity-building programs, and develop-ment cooperation can complement domestic reforms, particularly in areas of governance, econom-ic diversification, and social inclusion.

Iran's role is best shaped through diplomatic engagement and economic reform. Active participa-tion in regional dialogues, including with the GCC, can secure commitments to non-proliferation and peaceful coexistence. Economic diversification, including the development of technology sec-tors and the attraction of foreign investment, reduces dependence on oil revenues and promotes stability. Addressing domestic human rights concerns can ease tensions with Western powers and enhance prospects for constructive regional cooperation.

The European Union can leverage its diplomatic, financial, and technical tools to foster stability and sustainable development in the region. Encouraging multilateral trade agreements strengthens economic ties between Europe and Gulf nations while promoting investment in sustainable sec-tors. Support for humanitarian initiatives in conflict-affected regions, particularly Yemen and Syr-ia, alleviates human suffering and reinforces regional stability. By leading on climate action and engaging regional partners in collaborative sustainability projects, the EU can address shared challenges such as water scarcity, renewable energy development, and environmental resilience.

Other regional and global actors also play significant roles. Turkey can mediate regional dis-putes, promote constructive dialogue, and expand trade relations, while participating in coopera-tive security protocols to counter terrorism and organized crime. China can support economic and infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative, secure energy partnerships, and act as a neutral mediator in regional disputes. India can strengthen strategic partnerships with Gulf na-tions, advance energy cooperation, promote cultural diplomacy, and participate in regional cli-mate initiatives. The United States should emphasize diplomacy over military interventions, re-inforce partnerships with GCC states, and provide

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targeted support for counter-extremism pro-grams. Russia can enhance stability by participating in multilateral negotiations, developing en-ergy collaborations, and increasing trade and investment across key sectors such as defense, ener-gy, and technology.

In sum, a coordinated approach that integrates Iraq's domestic priorities with EU support and regional cooperation frameworks offers the potential to stabilize the Gulf, promote inclusive development, and address contemporary challenges. By aligning security, economic, and govern-ance initiatives across national, regional, and international actors, the Gulf region can foster mu-tual understanding, reduce conflict risk, and build pathways toward sustainable prosperity.

Perspective

The Persian Gulf stands at once as a crucible of tension and a corridor of opportunity. Its waters, long the stage for empires and trade, remain the lifeblood of global energy flows, while its socie-ties, economies, and political landscapes are shaped by centuries of history, tribal networks, and cross-border affiliations. To imagine a more cooperative Gulf is to confront both its perils and its possibilities: a region where rivalry has too often outweighed partnership, yet where the potential for integration, dialogue, and shared prosperity has never been greater.

The Gulf's states, if they can transform suspicion into solidarity, and if external actors engage not as patrons but as genuine partners, could reshape this once-fractured waterway into a strategic corridor linking over 2 billion people across the Gulf, the Levant, the Maghreb, the Euro-Mediterranean, and Asia. This corridor could facilitate trade worth trillions of dollars annually, secure the transit of more than 40 percent of global oil shipments, and channel knowledge, tech-nology, and culture across continents. But if mismanaged, the same corridor could harden into a fault line of rivalry, a sieve of insecurity, a theater where competition eclipses cooperation. Guid-ed wisely, however, it could become the artery through which the region's prosperity, stability, and influence pulse for generations.

Europe, through the EU collectively, wields substantial economic, technological, and normative influence in the Gulf, though coordination among member states remains uneven. When harmo-nized with GCC efforts, EU–GCC cooperation can amplify regional standards, secure investment flows, and shape strategic priorities. This synergy is particularly relevant in infrastructure, avia-tion, maritime services, renewable energy, and climate adaptation, where European expertise complements Gulf financial heft and developmental ambition. At the same time, the Gulf's inte-gration potential hinges on the gradual strengthening of GCC governance, especially in light of Yemen's prospective accession, the need to reconcile internal rivalries, and the broader impera-tives of regional security and trade.

External powers—China, India, the United States, Russia—also shape Gulf trajectories. China's infrastructural and economic footprint demonstrates how influence can be exerted without mili-tary intervention, while India's emerging role highlights the convergence of energy, trade, labor, and security interests. The interplay of these powers underscores the Gulf's position as a global crossroads and emphasizes the importance of carefully calibrated regional cooperation.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Ultimately, the strategic perspective is clear: the Persian Gulf cannot be treated merely as a prize to be claimed. It must be approached as a corridor to be cultivated, a system to be stabilized, and a network of states, societies, and economies to be integrated. The stakes are high, the challenges real, but the opportunities—economic, geopolitical, and cultural—are unprecedented. The Gulf's future will be determined not solely by resources or military might, but by the capacity of its states and their partners to translate ambition into cooperation, suspicion into solidarity, and po-tential into enduring influence.

The Persian Gulf, once seen merely as a bottleneck or a battlefield of competing ambitions, can instead be reimagined as a vast artery of connectivity, a conduit through which the lifeblood of commerce, culture, and cooperation flows. If suspicion yields to solidarity, if dialogue replaces dominance, the Gulf can link not only its own shores but the Levant's ancient corridors, the Ma-ghreb's sun-baked coasts, the Euro-Mediterranean's markets, and the sprawling landscapes of Asia. It could carry trillions in trade, tens of millions in human capital, and the collective aspira-tion of over two billion people, transforming a region historically defined by fragility into a hub of resilience and influence. Yet this transformation is a task of patience as much as power, of trust as much as technology; missteps could harden these channels into fault lines of rivalry, but careful stewardship could weave them into a fabric of shared prosperity. In this vision, the Gulf is no longer a periphery contested by outsiders; it becomes the beating heart of a network that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, from history into the future, from rivalry into part-nership.

Whose fault is it if the Persian Gulf, once a chokepoint of conflict and competition, will not be-come the artery of a connected region, linking the Levant, the Maghreb, the Euro-Mediterranean, and Asia, and carrying the shared commerce, culture, and aspirations of over two billion people toward a future of cooperation and resilience?

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International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Appendix 1 - Kabaye Zarthust revisited

Iranian society is deeply divided along generational, ideological, and political lines, creating a complex landscape of competing interests and visions for the country's future. One key cleavage exists between the old guard—conservative elites entrenched in the Revolutionary Guard and state institutions—and the younger generation, which is more urban, globally connected, and socially liberal. This generational divide shapes debates over governance, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights, with youth demanding greater transparency, accountability, and personal freedoms. Centrists and reformist groups often find themselves squeezed between these forces, navigating pressures from both conservative institutions and popular demands for change. These tensions over human rights, governance, and the rule of law highlight the broader struggle within Iran between preserving established power structures and responding to the aspirations of its population.

The Ka'ba-ye Zartosht—often translated as the Cube of Zoroaster—is a striking, enigmatic stone structure located in the Naqsh-e Rustam necropolis near Persepolis in Fars Province, Iran. De-spite its name, it has no confirmed connection to Zoroaster himself, nor was it necessarily a Zoro-astrian shrine. The name was popularized in the 14th century, likely due to European travelers who misinterpreted its cubic form and smoke-stained interior as a fire temple. Architecturally, the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht is a rectangular tower built from white limestone blocks, assembled without mortar but joined by dovetail joints—a hallmark of Achaemenid engineering. It stands approximately 12 meters tall, or 14 meters including its triple-tiered platform, with each side of its base measuring about 7.3 meters. A 30-step staircase leads to a small chamber inside, whose purpose remains debated.

Historically, the structure dates to the Achaemenid period (likely during the reign of Darius I or Xerxes I), but its significance deepened in the Sassanian era. It became a repository for royal inscriptions, most notably those of Shapur I, who recorded his victories over the Romans in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek. Below these, the high priest Kartir inscribed his religious campaigns, making the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht a rare trilingual monument of imperial and religious authority. Its function remains uncertain. Theories range from a fire temple, a royal mausoleum, a reposi-tory for sacred texts, or even a solar calendar. Yet none are conclusive. What is clear is that the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht stands as a symbolic hinge between Achaemenid grandeur and Sassanian ideological consolidation, embodying Iran's layered imperial and religious history.

Here is a simplified and bullet-free version of your proposal, using clear and direct language:

Political Program for a House of Minorities in Shiraz

In light of Iran's complex treatment of religious minorities, this program aims to guarantee equal rights, fair representation, and protection for all minority communities. It proposes reserved seats in parliament for officially recognized religious minorities, ensuring they have a voice in national decision-making. Laws should be passed to protect their rights, including freedom of religion, expression, and cultural practice. Education about minority histories and cultures must be promot-ed, and cultural centers and museums should be established to preserve their heritage. Anti-discrimination laws should be enforced to prevent bias based on

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

religion or ethnicity. Finally, the program encourages open dialogue and cooperation between majority and minority communities to build mutual understanding and social unity.

Architectural Design Concept for a House of Minorities

The design draws inspiration from Persian architecture, which is deeply rooted in spirituality and reflection. The building should include quiet courtyards, prayer rooms, and spaces for meditation to support contemplation and inner peace. It must also harmonize with nature, using materials like stone, wood, and earthy tones that blend with the landscape. Open-air gardens or courtyards should be placed at the heart of the structure to create communal gathering spaces and connect people with the natural world. The layout should follow geometric principles, especially squares and rectangles, which symbolize balance and order. A central courtyard surrounded by rooms on all sides, shaped as a cube, will express unity and simplicity—core values of the House of Minori-ties

Figure – Kabaye Zarthust – Twilight of Iran

Persian architecture is renowned for its masterful use of light and shadow. Intricate lattice screens and stained glass windows create mesmerizing patterns that shift throughout the day. In our cubic house, windows are placed strategically to allow sunlight to filter through at different times, en-hancing the spiritual and aesthetic experience.

The design celebrates decorative detail. Delicate tilework, calligraphy, and arabesque motifs en-rich the structure. The façade of the cubic form is adorned with geometric patterns, using ceramic tiles or carved stone to evoke tradition and craftsmanship. Water features play a central role in Persian gardens and homes. Fountains, reflecting pools, and channels bring serenity and movement. Within the central courtyard of our cubic house, a small water element introduces the calming sound of flowing water, fostering tranquillity and reflection.

The building itself is imagined as a three-story cubic structure with a flat roof. Each floor sur-rounds an open central courtyard. The ground floor includes communal spaces such as a welcom-ing entrance, a shared kitchen, and a gathering area. The second floor offers private rooms for res-idents, each with windows overlooking the courtyard. The top floor serves as a

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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retreat—a library, an art studio, or a meditation room—with panoramic views of the surroundings. This concept is flexible and can be adapted to meet the cultural and practical needs of Iran's minority communi-ties.

The exterior design features a bold black façade, creating a striking visual impact. The cubic form emphasizes clean lines and geometric simplicity. Inside, a minimalist white palette enhances natu-ral light and creates a sense of openness. The spatial layout ensures smooth transitions between public and private areas, maintaining a harmonious flow throughout the structure.

Turning to the broader political context, Iran faces several dangers and opportunities for reform. The dual system of governance—combining supreme leadership with elected officials—can lead to internal conflict and instability. If the next Supreme Leader lacks strong religious credentials, this may deepen divisions. Continued human rights abuses, especially against minorities, threaten social cohesion.

Yet there are also openings for change. Iran's foreign policy is vulnerable due to economic strain, limited military capacity, and diplomatic isolation. The regime's unpopularity among its own citi-zens creates space for alternative narratives and reformist momentum. The international commu-nity should recognize these weaknesses and engage strategically, supporting efforts that promote accountability, inclusion, and long-term stability.

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Appenddix 2 - Summit Declaration

1. We, the Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held our first Summit on 16 October 2024 in Brussels, Belgium, under the theme "Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity"to celebrate the deepening partnership between the two blocs, co-chaired by H.E.Charles Michel, President of the European Council and H.H. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad AlThani, Amir of the State of Qatar as rotating President of the Gulf Cooperation Council,in the presence of H.E. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission,and, H.E. Jasem Al Budaiwi, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council and H.E.Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and SecurityPolicy.

2. Recognising the growing political EU-GCC ties and challenges to regional and international peace, security and stability, we commit to our EU-GCC Strategic Partnership and pledge to elevate it to the next level. We agree to build our Strategic Partnership, based on mutual respect and trust, for the benefit of the people of our regions and beyond. Through this special Partnership, we will work together to promote global and regional security and prosperity, including preventing the emergence and escalation of conflicts and resolving crises by enhancing our dialogue, coordination and engagement.

3. Our Strategic Partnership aims to be the motor in promoting our common objectives as close partners, anchored in respect for an international rules-based order fully respecting international law, including the United Nations (UN) Charter, international humanitarian law and the promotion and protection of universal human rights. We acknowledge the need to support multilateralism and the importance of sustainable development and prosperity.

4. Our solid political dialogue in several key policy and sectoral priorities confirms our common interests and level of ambition. The extensive preparatory work through our numerous joint dialogues on geopolitical developments and regional security, macroeconomics, connectivity, trade and investment, the business environment, research and innovation, development cooperation and humanitarian coordination have significantly reinforced our partnership, mutual understanding, and directly supported the preparation for this Summit. We welcome the "EU Joint Communication for a Strategic Partnership" adopted in May 2022 and we confirm our strong mutual commitment towardsstrengthening our Strategic Partnership in line with the Joint Action Programme 2022-2027. We welcome the outcome of the Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting in October 2023 in Muscat, Oman. We will also further enhance our dialogue and cooperation on security, including the countering of emerging threats through the definition and implementation of joint priorities and coordinated initiatives.

5. In this spirit, the EU and GCC will engage in fostering multilateral, regional, bilateral frameworks with a view to further strengthening bilateral and regional cooperation.

6. We agree to continue our dialogue on a regular basis by holding a summit every two years and look forward to holding the next Summit in Saudi Arabia in 2026.

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7. We agree to hold the 29th Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting in the State of Kuwait in 2025.

I. Partnership for sustainable prosperity and security

A. Increasing trade, investment and economic cooperation:

1. We reconfirm our shared interest to have a thriving and mutually favourable trade and investment relationship that must be developed, as appropriate, through multilateral, regional, and bilateral frameworks.

2. We reaffirm our joint commitment to a strategic trade and investment partnership, between parties sharing mutual interests and ambition, tapping into the opportunities offered by an enhanced business and investment environment, the green and digital transitions, sustainable energy, connectivity, and advancing on sectoral cooperation in areas contributing to the goal of enhanced economic integration and diversification of our respective economies.

3. We will aim to take forward our discussions at regional level with a view to reach a regional GCC-EU Free Trade Agreement, including an investment chapter. In light of the cooperation arrangements signed between EU and GCC countries, we will continue to explore tailor-made agreements supporting trade and investments.

4. We commit to advancing our EU-GCC Trade and Investment Dialogue and further enhancing joint investments to enable cooperation on trade, facilitating regulatory cooperation and harmonisation of standards, strengthening dialogue on restrictive measures and their implementation and increase the protection of intellectual property rights including geographical indications.

5. We recognise that the future of our economies depends on their ability to become more circular, cleaner, more resilient against disruptions in supply chains and more diverse in value producing sectors. Therefore, we will aim to advance resilient, sustainable, global value chains, and secure resilient energy supply chains including on clean technologies, raw materials and critical minerals. We also confirm our common interest in a stable andstructured framework for the EU-GCC interaction on multilateral trade policy agendas.In this respect, we underline the importance of our cooperation within the World TradeOrganization (WTO), which is essential to contribute to a fully functioning disputesettlement mechanism, in order to strengthen the multilateral trading system.

6. We will explore cooperation opportunities in various fields, such as fintech, digital transformation and health by exploring joint research and development in major fields, including in the event of pandemics.

7. We will continue working together to foster business cooperation and explore ways to enhance market access conditions and supporting investment-inducing policies as well as by jointly supporting the creation of bodies of European and Gulf business representatives in the countries of both regions and by holding targeted events such as the EU-GCC Business Forum in November 2024 in Doha, Qatar. We will strive to foster investment events such as investment forums, round table discussions and workshops for the private sector.

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B. Enhancing energy cooperation and the fight against climate change

8. We commit to intensifying our energy cooperation, through the long-standing GCC-EU Energy Experts Group and other formats, to explore greater cooperation on energy security, including energy efficiency and renewable energies. We underline the importance of EU-OPEC dialogue, notably to discuss energy security, energy transition, and just transition issues. We recognise the strategic importance of our cooperation on stable, reliable, and sustainable energy markets to reduce volatility and to enhance the security of energy supply. We recall the urgent need to address climate change and stress the importance of the energy transition.

9. We join our efforts to create sustainable and diversified economies that benefit our populations and contribute to global climate action, in line with the Paris Agreement and respective national circumstances and obligations. We will increase our collaboration on renewable energy and hydrogen, energy efficiency, renewable electricity and abatement and removal technologies such as carbon capture and utilisation and storage, and will also assess prospects for joint connectivity. We will also combine our strengths in innovation, as with regards to zero and low emission technologies and critical energy transition minerals.

10. We reiterate our respective commitments to scale up urgent action to address the crises and challenges posed by climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, ocean and land degradation, drought and pollution. We welcome the outcomes of COP28 in the UAE and stress the need to ensure the implementation of the UAE consensus with ambitious efforts on climate change adaptation and mitigation and stress the importance of international cooperation in this regard. We look forward to successful outcomes at the upcoming COP29, with a decision on a climate finance that takes into account the needs and priorities of developing countries and is in line with the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement goals. We emphasise the importance of pursuing efforts to limiting 1.5 °C temperature increase and ensuring that our next Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) reflect progression, ambition and different national circumstances, priorities and approaches. We welcome the upcoming UN Water Conference in the UAE in 2026 to accelerate the implementation of SDG6 on clean water and sanitation.

11. We reaffirm commitment to the full and effective implementation of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF), with further decisions to be adopted at CBD COP16 on outstanding issues, and advocate for meaningful outcomes enhancing action to address desertification, land degradation and drought at UNCCD COP16, hosted by Saudi Arabia in December 2024.

12. We acknowledge the need to enhance our collective efforts to end plastic pollution and work together for an ambitious, fair and transparent international instrument on plastic pollution based on a comprehensive approach in line with the mandate of UNEA resolution 5/14. We will engage actively and constructively in the spirit of collaboration and consensus-building at the INC5 session in the Republic of Korea.

C. Strengthening connectivity between our regions

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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13. We agree on the need to explore cooperation in telecommunication, advanced technologies, digital economy, innovation and space, to create a better digital world for future generations, encourage initiatives related to the exchange of knowledge and advanced technologies.

14. We will strengthen cooperation to underpin investment and trade in zero and low emission and clean technologies and their components, and work to diversify and secure supply chains globally in line with international best practices, including for critical energy transition minerals, and encourage resource efficiency. We will continue cooperation on energy efficiency and on ensuring stability, security and affordability of global sustainable energy markets.

15. We will cooperate to promote sustainable transport, as well as high quality, reliable, sustainable and climate resilient infrastructure, including regional and cross-border infrastructure, in line with relevant international standards and principles. We aim to explore further cooperation in the relevant areas of transport policy, including integrated transport policy covering rail, maritime, and aviation.

16. We will promote cooperation in appropriate international transport fora aimed at ensuring enforcement of international conventions and regulations.

17. We agree on the importance of strengthening connectivity between our regions and will explore practical means to step-up cooperation in this area, notably with regard to energy grids and hydrogen transportation, as well as the digital sphere, especially data cables.

18. Taking into account the potential of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in accelerating sustainable development, we resolve to identify pathways to jointlypromote digital transformation, while at the same time promote convergence ofinternational standards in the digital domain.

19. We will step-up cooperation between our two regions to foster sustainable investments in geographical and thematic areas of mutual interest, including through joint ventures and frameworks. We emphasise equitable partnerships that respect each region’s economic circumstances and ensure fair distribution of responsibilities and benefits. We expressed readiness to explore cooperation on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the EU framework of Global Gateway.

D. Stepping-up engagement on development and humanitarian aid

20. We welcome the commitments of the EU-GCC Joint Council on humanitarian aid and endorse the way forward for enhanced joint advocacy at international, regional and

local levels to ensuring humanitarian access and promoting respect for international humanitarian law, exploring parallel funding in response to crises where both parties share common concerns, as appropriate, and a structured cooperation and coordination mechanism on disaster response between the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) and the GCC Emergency Management Centre, with the mutually beneficial use of national expertise in this field. We highlight the importance of safeguarding the humanitarian space,

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protection of civilians, healthcare and respect for International Humanitarian Law in all contexts.

21. We will strive to cooperate on global issues and the follow-up of the Summit of the Future and work towards a successful outcome of COP29 and COP30. We will explore ways to coordinate towards achieving impactful outcomes at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development and the 2nd World Summit on Social Development, to be respectively held in Spain and Qatar in 2025. We commit to enhanced collaboration in the context of accelerating the full implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals. We support UN efforts in helping shape a multilateral system designed to deliver more fairly and effectively for all.

E. Reinforcing joint efforts to address key global issues

22. In light of the serious escalation and ongoing war in the Middle East and in Europe, we confirm our strategic engagement to work towards enhancing security and de- escalation for the benefit of both regions. In this light, we welcome the launch of the EU-GCC Regional Security Dialogue in January 2024 and note the progress made in developing joint approaches towards global and regional security challenges and deepening security cooperation, including on counter-terrorism, maritime security, cyber issues, non-proliferation, as disaster preparedness and emergency management as well as peacebuilding efforts such as mediation and negotiation.

23. We will cooperate in fighting organised crime, including the fight against migrant smuggling and human trafficking with a view to effectively disrupt, pursue and prosecute these illegal activities through enhanced cooperation at international level.

24. We welcome the results of the ministerial High-Level Forum on Regional Security and Cooperation on 22 April 2024 in Luxembourg and agree to hold a new edition of this format in 2025, followed by further yearly iterations to continue developing our joint work.

25. We welcome the GCC's Vision for Regional Security and recognize that GCC states playa fundamental role in dispute mediation and resolution to preserve peace and securityregionally and across the globe.

26. We undertake to strengthen our cooperation on combating money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism, including in the context of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and FATF-Style Regional Bodies. We reconfirm our joint efforts to tackle the threats presented by organised crime, and address challenges, taking into account respective legal frameworks, as well as exploring ways to enhance judicial and law enforcement cooperation through relevant EU and GCC bodies and complementing bilateral cooperation.

F. Building bridges between people

27. In line with legal requirements in both regions, we reaffirm our commitment to continue efforts to enhance our people- to- people contacts by continuing to work together on practical and constructive steps towards a safe and mutually beneficial visa- free travel arrangement between the EU/Schengen and the GCC countries.

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28. We commend our already rich and vigorous people-to-people contacts, which should continue to be at the heart of the EU-GCC partnership. To this end, we will work for a deeper engagement of GCC academia and students in the Erasmus+ and partnering through Horizon Europe programmes. We will encourage more administrative and financial support instruments that can enhance people-to-people contacts and institutional cooperation in the fields of youth, sport, culture, (non-higher) education, and interregional cultural relations in the creative industries.

29. We further commit to enhance our partnership to jointly address hate speech, extremism and racism and promote tolerance, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, in line with the provisions of Security Council resolution 2686. Reiterating our commitment to ensure the respect, protection and promotion of universal human rights, we will continue and deepen our Human Rights Dialogues as a key element of our cooperation and stress the importance of relevant UN human rights treaties and mechanisms.

II. Partnership for long-lasting stability and peace

A. Ukraine

30. We reaffirm our respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, and their commitment to the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, International Law and international humanitarian Law. In line with the UN Charter, all states must refrain from the threat or use of force to seek territorial acquisition against the territorial integrity and sovereignty or political independence of any state. We stress the importance of supporting all efforts to facilitate the export of grains and all food and humanitarian supplies to contribute to achieving food security for the affected countries.

31. We welcome mediation efforts by the GCC countries on humanitarian issues, such as exchange of prisoners of war and reunification of families, as well hosting of national security advisors meeting, including in Copenhagen and Jeddah, and we recognize the efforts of the EU and Switzerland in contributing to just and lasting peace in Ukraine.

32. We recall the UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1, which “deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in violation of Article 2 (4) of the Charter” and “demands that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders”. In line with the resolutions adopted at the UN General Assembly ES-11/1, ES-11/2, ES 11/4 and ES-11/6, we underscore the need to reach, as soon as possible, a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine in line with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. We reaffirm our commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, extending to its territorial waters.

33. We condemn attacks against civilians and civilian and critical infrastructure, especially in the energy sector that inter alia increases risks for nuclear safety. We will and call on all partners to intensify the provision of humanitarian and civil protection assistance, and support for the energy infrastructures, including equipment such as power generators and power transformers. The safety and security of all nuclear power plants is essential. In this regard,

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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we call for continued support of the important work of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

34. We deplore that this prolonged war is causing immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy. We also commit to build support for pathways towards a framework for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, based on international law, including the United Nations Charter.

B. Israel, Gaza and the West Bank

35. In line with the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, including most recently 2712 (2023), 2720 (2023), 2728 (2024) and 2735 (2024) we express our utmost concern over developments in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

36. We call for the full implementation of UNSCR 2735, including an immediate, full and complete ceasefire, the release of hostages, the exchange of the Palestinian prisoners as well as immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilian population, including the safe and effective distribution of humanitarian assistance at scale throughout the Gaza strip to all Palestinian civilians who need it. We support the leaders of the United States, Egypt and Qatar in their efforts.

37. We call on all parties to comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and the implementation of International Court of Justice orders notably with regard to the protection of civilians, especially children. We condemn attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure. We urge all parties to allow, facilitate and enable the full, rapid, safe and unhindered delivery of expanded humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip, we stress the need for the prompt and unconditional provision of humanitarian aid through opening all crossings in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution (2735), supporting the works of UNRWA and other UN agencies. We underscore the essential services provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Gaza and across the region.

38. We reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the realization of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination through the Two-State solution where Israel and Palestine live side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders, along the 1967 lines, consistent with international law and relevant UN resolutions and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. We will continue to work together towards reviving a political process to this end, including by supporting the Palestinian Authority in its reform plans. Actions weakening the Palestinian Authority must stop.

39. We are concerned about increasing tensions in the region and urge all parties to exercise restraint, prevent further escalation and engage in international diplomatic efforts to end the current destructive cycle of violence.

40. We are deeply concerned by the military operations in the West Bank which have led to a high number of civilian casualties and destruction of civilian infrastructure, and call for their immediate end. We strongly condemn the ongoing extremist settler violence in the West

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Bank, including East Jerusalem. We condemn the Israeli government's decisions to further expand settlements and legalise settler outposts across the occupied West Bank and urge Israel to reverse these decisions. We urge to immediately cease all unilateral measures that undermine prospects for peace including settlement activities, land confiscation, displacement of Palestinians, and violations of international law. We condemn all forms of violence, incitements of it, and terrorism. We underline the importance of preserving the historical Status Quo in Jerusalem and its holy sites, recognizing the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in this regard.

41. We deplore all loss of civilian life , in particular children, as well as the catastrophic levelsof hunger and imminent risk of famine, caused by the insufficient entry and distributionof delivered aid into Gaza. We strongly condemn attacks against civilians and humanitarian workers, whose safety must be ensured.

42. We welcome the formation of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, announced by Saudi Arabia, the EU and Norway, on September 26, 2024 in New York. We also support the initiative by Saudi Arabia, the EU, the League of Arab States, Egypt and Jordan to revive the Middle East peace process launched in September 2023 in New York and welcome the Bahrain Declaration's call in May 2024 for an international peace conference in the near future.

C. Lebanon

43. We are extremely concerned by the dangerous escalation in Lebanon, affirm our support for the Lebanese people, and call for an immediate ceasefire. We call on intensifying international and regional efforts to provide urgent humanitarian aid to Lebanon to alleviate the suffering of civilians and protect them from any war repercussions. We also call for restraint and de-escalation and preventing the expansion of the conflict to the wider region. We stress the need to implement Security Council Resolution 1701 and other relevant international resolutions and the Taif Agreement to restore lasting security and stability in Lebanon and ensure respect for its territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. We recognize the essential stabilizing role played by the Lebanese Armed Forces and UN interim force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in mitigating risk of escalation. We condemn all attacks against UN missions and express particularly grave concerns regarding the recent attack against UNIFIL.

44. We support the efforts of the Quintet on Lebanon, which stressed the importance of accelerating presidential elections, restoring the Lebanese government's authority throughout the country and implementing the economic reforms. We support efforts to reintegrate Lebanon in the region, including initiatives to rebuild confidence and cooperation with Lebanon.

D. Iran

45. We emphasize the importance of adherence to international law, including the UN Charter, based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, and refraining from the use of force or threats. We underscore the importance of diplomatic engagement with Iran — to pursue regional de-escalation. We stress the

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importance of ensuring the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program, and ceasing of proliferation of ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles and any technologies that threaten the security of both our regions and beyond as well asunder-mine international peace and security in violation of relevant UN laws and resolutions.

We express shared interest in a close EU-GCC dialogue on these issues. We call on Iran to pursue regional de-escalation. We remain committed to a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. We regret that Iran's unabated nuclear advances over the last five years have made a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) increasingly difficult. We urge Iran to implement all its safeguards obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and return to the implementation of the Addition Protocol. We share a clear determination that Iran must never develop or acquire a nuclear weapon. We reaffirm the importance of the UNSC Resolution 2231, and our lasting commitment to ensure that the Gulf and wider region remains free of nuclear weapons. We emphasize the importance of adherence to international law, including the UN Charter, based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non- interference in internal affairs, and refraining from the use of force or threats.

46. In this respect, we call on Iran to end its occupation of the three islands of the United Arab Emirates, Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa, which constitutes a violation of the sovereignty of the UAE and the principles of the Charter of the UN.

E. Red Sea

47. In line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024), we reaffirm our commitment to ensuring the freedom of navigation and maritime security in the Red Sea, which are fundamental for global trade and the free movement of essential commodities, including the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the population of Yemen, and safe passage through those shipping lanes. We express deep concern about the threat to security and navigation in the Red Sea in line with United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2722 and in accordance with international law. We demand that the Houthis halt attacks against vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, release crew and avoid any further escalatory measures that threaten global security and stability. We appreciate regional efforts, those of the Combined Maritime Forces, the EU defensive Operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES and others, with the aim of safeguarding freedom of navigation in the international waters in the Red Sea. We welcome the efforts to contain any environmental effects following the attacks by the Houthis on the Greek oil tanker Sounion. Emphasising the importance of political solution, we aim to develop a joint GCC-EU approach to maritime security in the context of the EU Structured Security Dialogue to address relevant issues in the Red Sea.

F. Yemen

48. We support peaceful, inclusive, orderly and Yemeni-led political process under UN auspices (UN SC Resolution 2216) to end the conflict. We call on the parties, especially on the Houthis, to engage meaningfully with the UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg and to return to the negotiations table in order to achieve a sustainable peace in Yemen. We demand that the Houthis cease their bellicose rhetoric and action, threatening the return of warfare.

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We call for the immediate and unconditional release of the humanitarian workers, UN and diplomatic staff detained by the Houthis, severely hampering the capacity of international community to help the millions of Yemenis in urgent need of assistance. We express deep concern for the humanitarian condition of the Yemeni civilian population and call for cessation of all restrictions and interference to safe, rapid and unimpeded access of humanitarian aid to all those in need in the country. We condemn all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual violence in conflict and torture.

49. We commend the efforts of Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Nations to reach a comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable political solution, stressing the necessity of a ceasefire.

G. Iraq

50. We continue to closely follow the issue of maritime border between Iraq and Kuwait. Solving the remaining outstanding issues between the two neighbouring countries according to International Law would contribute positively to regional stability and cooperation. We highlight the importance of Iraq's commitment to Kuwait's sovereignty and territorial integrity and respect for bilateral agreements, international conventions and relevant UN resolutions, especially UNSC Resolution 833.We call for the complete demarcation of the Kuwait-Iraq maritime boundary beyond boundary point 162. We stress the importance of the full implementation of the 2012 Kuwait-Iraq Agreement to regulate maritime navigation in Khor Abdullah, signed on April 29, 2012, entered into force on December 5, 2013 and jointly deposited at the United Nations on December 18, 2013, and call for the resumption of meetings of the Joint Committee for Regulating Maritime Navigation in Khor Abdullah.

51. We renew our support for UNSC Resolution 2107 (2013) which instructed the UN Secretary-General's special envoy and UN Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) to enhance efforts regarding the repatriation of all Kuwaitis and third country nationals, including missing persons or their remains, under the auspices of the ICRC, and return Kuwaiti property, including national archives. We call on Iraq and the UN to exert maximum efforts to reach a resolution of all the issues involved.

52. We express support for full implementation of the UNSC Resolution 2732 (2024) and UNSecurity Council continued oversight of the matter.

H. Syria

53. We reaffirm our commitment to an inclusive political solution that preserves Syria's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, in line with the UNSC Resolution 2254 and relevant United Nations resolutions. To that end, the EU and the GCC reiterate their support to the efforts led by the UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and urge a redoubling of efforts for the urgent resumption of the constitutional committee as well as other key areas, such as addressing missing persons and the need to create secure conditions for the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons consistent with UN standards and providing the necessary support to them and host communities. We call for coordinated action to combat the production and trafficking of drugs from Syria.

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I. Sudan

54. We reaffirm our utmost concern with regard to the devastating conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan, including the imminent risk of famine. We underscore the importance of returning to a political process leading to civilian rule and the need to avoid a spill-over of the conflict into neighbouring countries which would further exacerbate the existing toll on human lives and development and urge the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces to engage seriously and effectively with crisis resolution initiatives, including the Jeddah platform. We stress there can be no military solution to the conflict in Sudan and reiterate our strong support for lasting peace and justice in Sudan. These can only be achieved via de-escalation, an immediate and permanent a cessation of hostilities and dialogue, and putting an end to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. We will work jointly to provide full support to ongoing mediation and humanitarian efforts, including to secure humanitarian access and protection in accordance with international law.

55. We stress the importance of Sudan's two parties' commitment in accordance with the Jeddah Declaration of 11 May 2023, to protecting civilians, providing humanitarian assistance according to international humanitarian law and human rights law, putting an end to the conflict and returning to the political process. We also stress that the solution to the crisis can only be achieved through a political solution that respects the sovereignty and unity of Sudan and preserves its state institutions.

J. Somalia

56. We express our concern about the current the situation in Somalia. We are fully determined to support Somalia in the post-ATMIS era. We are fully aware that the international support requires close coordination in the peace process and humanitarian assistance. We are committed to work closely to provide a satisfying and long-lasting solution for Somalia.

57. We affirm support for Security Council Resolution 2748, which stresses full respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Somalia, and the need for a comprehensive approach that enhances the fundamentals of peace and stability, in line with the priorities set by the Government of Somalia.

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Appendix 3- PG Naval Cooperation Scheme

The assumption of the Indian-led naval cooperation scheme is that full cooperation between Iran and India is resumed, encompassing not only routine naval diplomacy and maritime security coor-dination but also a deeper institutional rationalisation on the Iranian side, including the gradual merger of IRGC naval units into the regular navy of the Artesh. The rationale for such a merger would lie in the need to present a single, coherent naval interlocutor capable of engaging credibly in sustained cooperation with a major maritime power such as India, whose naval doctrine, legal culture, and operational practices are firmly anchored in conventional state-to-state frameworks. From this perspective, the continued existence of parallel naval chains of command complicates interoperability, dilutes accountability, and raises political and legal uncertainties that limit the scope of meaningful cooperation beyond symbolic engagement.

The process of merging IRGC naval units into the Artesh navy would not imply the abandonment of asymmetric capabilities developed by the IRGC, but rather their institutional absorption into a unified naval structure with a single command authority, standardized training, and harmonised rules of engagement. Littoral and denial-oriented forces could be retained as specialised coastal commands within the regular navy, preserving their tactical utility while subordinating them to a conventional military hierarchy and doctrine. Such a reconfiguration would allow Iran to retain its deterrent posture in constrained waters while aligning its naval governance more closely with in-ternational expectations of professionalism, predictability, and centralized control.

This institutional integration is inherently intertwined with the prospects for Indo-Iranian naval cooperation because India's strategic calculus places a premium on stability, clarity of command, and the insulation of maritime security cooperation from ideological or irregular military actors. For New Delhi, engagement with a unified Iranian navy operating under the Artesh would lower political risk, facilitate information sharing, and enable cooperation in areas such as sea-line pro-tection, anti-piracy operations, and coordinated presence in the Gulf of Oman and the northern Indian Ocean. Conversely, for Tehran, such integration would signal a shift from revolutionary exceptionalism toward sovereign normalisation in the maritime domain, strengthening its claim to be a responsible regional naval actor and enhancing its capacity to participate in multilateral or minilateral security arrangements.

In this sense, the merger of IRGC naval units into the regular navy is not merely an internal mili-tary reform but a strategic enabler for deeper external cooperation. It links domestic governance reform to external alignment opportunities, making institutional unification a precondition for embedding Iran more fully into Indian-led or India-supported maritime security architectures across the western Indian Ocean. Cooperative security refers to a framework of security governance in which states seek to reduce the risks of conflict not primarily through deterrence or alliance-based balancing, but through in-stitutionalised cooperation, transparency, confidence-building, and the management of shared risks. Rather than identifying threats in adversarial terms, cooperative security emphasiz-es common vulnerabilities—such as the safety of sea lines of communication, piracy, environ-mental hazards, or accidental escalation—and addresses them through dialogue, joint mecha-nisms, and agreed norms of behavior. Its logic is preventative and stabilising: security is enhanced

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not by excluding others, but by embedding them in predictable patterns of interaction that lower uncertainty and constrain unilateral action.

Applied to the Persian Gulf, cooperative security is particularly relevant because the region is characterised by extreme strategic density, overlapping military presences, and chronic mistrust, combined with a shared dependence on uninterrupted maritime commerce. In such an environ-ment, traditional collective security arrangements or alliance structures have proven either politi-cally unacceptable or practically unworkable. Cooperative security offers an alternative by focus-ing on maritime safety, incident prevention, and functional cooperation rather than formal defence commitments. It allows states with divergent political systems and strategic alignments to participate without conceding sovereignty or ideological positions. Within this context, an India-led naval task force or flotilla in the Persian Gulf or Gulf of Oman would embody cooperative security by prioritising presence without domination, coordination without alliance obligations, and reassurance rather than coercion. India's strategic posture—non-allied, commercially dependent on Gulf sea lanes, and maintaining functional relations with all regional actors including Iran—positions it as a credible convenor of such a framework. An Indi-an-led initiative would likely emphasize escort missions, shared maritime domain awareness, de-confliction mechanisms, and professional naval interaction, rather than power projection or en-forcement operations. This distinguishes it from U.S.-led formations, which are often perceived through a deterrence or containment lens, and makes it more acceptable to regional actors wary of militarised blocs.

The relevance of cooperative security to an India-led flotilla is therefore twofold. Practically, it provides a mechanism to reduce the risk of incidents and escalation in one of the world's most constrained and militarised waterways. Strategically, it offers a pathway for gradual normalization of naval behavior, including by Iran, by embedding regional and extra-regional navies in routines of cooperation that reward restraint and professionalism. In this sense, cooperative security is not an alternative to deterrence in the Persian Gulf, but a complementary logic aimed at managing everyday risks and preventing crises from spiralling into open conflict.

European companies that could meaningfully support a merged Iranian naval structure in develop-ing ships, equipment, and maritime systems include several leading naval shipbuilders and sys-tems suppliers. Naval Group, a major French naval defence company, designs, builds, integrates, and maintains surface combatants and submarines, with expertise spanning the full lifecycle of warships and experience in technology transfer and naval systems integration. Navantia, the Spanish state-owned shipbuilder, is capable of producing a range of military vessels, including frigates and support ships, and is among the largest shipbuilders in Europe, providing advanced structural design and build capacity. Damen Shipyards Group, a Dutch shipbuilding group with a global footprint, offers a broad product range including warships, patrol craft, and support vessels, and is well regarded for modular design and lifecycle support. Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) in Germany is known for submarines and naval surface craft, with increasing activity in surface ship construction and electronics. CMN Naval, a French multinational shipbuilding firm, provides capabilities in patrol vessels and light combatants that could support smaller platform requirements or local assembly and maintenance.

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In terms of systems, sensors, and maritime equipment, Thales Underwater Systems specializes in sonar and underwater systems for both submarines and surface ships, with technologies widely used in naval platforms. European industrial frameworks, such as the SEA Naval consortium, coordinate R&D and next-generation naval technologies across Europe, including survivability, automation, and advanced sensors, which are key for integrating modern platforms. Industrial groupings such as EUROYARDS, which brings together major European shipyards, represent a significant portion of the continent's naval building and repair capacity, and GICAN, the French maritime industry association, represents shipyards, systems manufacturers, and maritime equip-ment suppliers, serving as a bridge to broader European maritime industrial networks.

The relevance of these companies to a merged Iranian navy lies in their comprehensive vessel portfolio, covering surface combatants, patrol vessels, support ships, and subsurface platforms, allowing a balanced fleet suited to the strategic environment. European suppliers are also leaders in radar, sonar, combat management systems, and maritime electronics, critical for networked naval operations and maritime domain awareness. Participation in European industrial groupings and funded programmes supports technology roadmapping, standardization, and lifecycle support, essential for a navy rebuilding governance, training, and maintenance capacities. Collectively, these firms represent the core of the EU's naval industrial capability and could, under the appro-priate legal and political frameworks, support efforts to enhance shipbuilding, modernize systems, and strengthen sustainment infrastructure for a unified Iranian naval force.

Agreement on Naval Cooperation in the Persian Gulf

Article 1 - Agreement

The Navy of India, the Coastguard of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the naval contingency task force of the Gulf Cooperation Council have hereby established a cooperative security scheme in the following fields: search and rescue, antipiracy, environmental degradation, and combatting drug smuggling.

Article 2 – Area of Operations

The activities under the cooperative security scheme may be undertaken only in the Persian Gulf. The pursuit of combatting drug smuggling and antipiracies may be conducted in international waters until the Gulf of Aden.

Article 3 – Joint Committee

An Indian vice-admiral is the overall commander of the joint naval task force.

India, I.R. of Iran, and the GCC undertake establishing a Joint Naval Committee to guide naval strategies and operational activities of the cooperative security scheme.

Article 4 – Assignment of Assets

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The parties of the agreement at this moment commit the following naval assets to the cooperation security regime:

India

- One Frigate
- A Catamaran Troop Carrier

Iran

- Four attack helicopters
- Two stealth Coastguard ships
- One Mine Sweeper

GCC

- One Marine Science Ship
- Five Helicopters
- Ten Fighter Aircraft
- Four Speedboats

Article 5 – Maritime Surveillance

The UAE has established a maritime surveillance centre in Ras-al-Khaiman. The centre maintains a register of commercial ships passing through the Hormuz Strait and publishes it on the internet for the general public's use and consideration.

Article 6 – Joint Exercises

The parties regularly engage in joint exercises. It invites the EU, Russia, China, and US observers to participate.

Article 7 – Delimitation of Maritime Borders

The Islamic Republic of Iran, at this moment, agrees to submit outstanding issues of disputes on the delimitation of maritime borders to arbitration according to procedures recognized under international law unless an agreement has not been reached by mutual agreement on a permanent regime within two years of the signing of this agreement.

The delimitation of the maritime borders serves the purpose of confidence-building and joint exploration of the sea bed.

Article 8 – Diplomatic Relations

The parties to the agreement at this moment exchange naval attachés.

Article 9 – Base Facilities

The Joint Naval Task Force has a permanent base at Hormuz Island.

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Article 10 – Port of Calls

The Joint Naval Task Force may undertake port calls throughout the territories of the parties to the cooperation scheme and all other parties interested in friendly and peaceful cooperation in the Persian Gulf.

Article 11 – Financing

The parties entertain the costs of the security cooperation scheme according to the following distribution key:

The Government of India: 30%

The Government of Iran: 30%

The Governments of GCC: 40%

Done, Bushire 2030

Appendix 4- Draft Treaty Between the Republic of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran on Border Cooperation and Management

The evolution of the Irano–Iraqi border regime reveals a complex trajectory marked by oscilla-tions between confrontation, negotiated accommodation, and pragmatic coexistence. Across the twentieth century, the frontier was not merely a line of demarcation but a strategic instrument through which both states sought to assert sovereignty, manage internal vulnerabilities, and shape regional balances of power. The border question thus evolved in tandem with regime type, region-al geopolitics, and domestic security imperatives.

During the era of Mohammad Reza Shah and Saddam Hussein, border management was embedded in a hard-edged realist framework. The 1975 Algiers Accord institutionalised a mixed commission tasked with resolving outstanding territorial and technical disputes, particularly along the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The agreement reflected a calculated trade-off: Iraq accepted the thalweg princi-ple in delineating the river boundary, thereby relinquishing its claim to exclusive pre-eminence over navigation, while Iran committed to curbing support and cross-border facilitation of Kurdish insurgent movements in northern Iraq. The arrangement demonstrated that even adversarial re-gimes could converge on a rules-based framework when domestic security and regime survival were at stake. Yet the durability of this regime remained contingent on political will; its collapse in 1980 underscored the fragility of treaty-based settlements absent mutual strategic restraint.

Here's the paragraph updated with a concluding sentence linking the wartime programs to Iran's post-war nuclear and missile trajectory:

During the Iran–Iraq War, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to relaunch Iran's nuclear weapons pro-gram, citing the existential threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime and the urgent need to en-sure national survival in the face of conventional military inferiority. While no public statements from Khomeini explicitly detail his reasoning, declassified IAEA documents and

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historical anal-yses indicate that the decision was driven by fears of Iraqi aggression and the need for strategic deterrence. The program was framed as a long-term strategic instrument intended to compensate for Iran's relative weakness in conventional forces. At the same time, Iran accelerated the devel-opment of its missile capabilities, prioritizing systems that could provide asymmetric responses and enhance deterrence. Among the key initiatives was the Shahab-1 missile, a short-range ballis-tic missile designed to strike Iraqi front-line positions and offset air force limitations. The Sha-hab-2 missile extended Iran's strike range to deeper targets, reinforcing deterrence against Iraqi military infrastructure. The Fajr-3 artillery rocket provided tactical support on the battlefield, al-lowing Iran to respond to Iraqi artillery and armored offensives. Concurrently, early uranium en-richment efforts were initiated to lay the foundation for a future nuclear deterrent. Iran also ex-plored tactical cruise missile concepts, aimed at developing indigenous precision strike capabili-ties. These programs were shaped by wartime constraints, including arms embargoes and limited access to foreign technology, necessitating domestic development. Collectively, they reflected a dual-track strategy focused on national survival, deterrence, and compensation for conventional weaknesses. While offensive capability was not the immediate goal, these programs established the basis for Iran's long-term strategic posture. Ultimately, Iran's nuclear and missile initiatives during the war were driven by the imperative to defend the homeland and maintain sovereignty under extreme external pressure. These wartime programs laid the technical, doctrinal, and indus-trial foundation for Iran's post-war nuclear and missile development, enabling the Islamic Repub-lic to pursue a sustained strategic deterrent and indigenous defense capability in the decades that followed.

These doctrinal developments concern how Iran justified and structured its strategic weapons pro-grams during and after the Iran–Iraq War. Specifically, they include:

1. Defensive deterrence doctrine – framing nuclear and missile programs primarily as tools to prevent aggression rather than for offensive conquest.
2. Asymmetric warfare doctrine – prioritizing missiles and rockets to compensate for con-ventional force weaknesses and leverage Iran's limited capabilities effectively.
3. Indigenous development principle – emphasizing self-reliance in nuclear and missile technologies due to arms embargoes and limited foreign access.
4. Survival-focused strategic calculus – integrating lessons from Iraq's use of chemical weapons and conventional superiority into planning for existential defense.
5. Long-term deterrence planning – creating programs that could evolve over decades to provide credible strategic options and ensure sovereignty.

In short, these doctrinal developments shaped Iran's strategic posture, linking its wartime weap-ons programs to post-war defense policy and the eventual pursuit of a sustained nuclear and mis-sile capability.

In the post-Saddam period, the bilateral relationship has been reconfigured under two Shia-led governments operating within a transformed regional order. Rather than zero-sum territorial rival-ry, the dominant pattern has shifted toward layered cooperation across security, economic, reli-gious, and infrastructural domains. A series of memoranda of understanding and sectoral agree-ments—ranging from border security coordination to energy interdependence and pilgrimage management—have incrementally stabilised the

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frontier. While asymmetries of influence persist, particularly given Iran's political and paramilitary networks in Iraq, the border itself has become less a theatre of direct confrontation and more a space of managed interdependence.

This trajectory suggests the long-term possibility of consolidating these functional arrangements into a comprehensive Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Such a framework could encompass joint border management mechanisms, integrated customs regimes, shared water governance, co-ordinated infrastructure corridors, sectoral cooperation, and institutionalised security dialogue as well as multi-level cross-sectoral dialogues augmenting existing Memoranda of Understanding. However, before aspiring to a broader strategic compact, priority should be given to modernising the existing border treaty regime itself.

The rationale for modernisation is fourfold. First, the legal architecture governing the border re-mains partially anchored in instruments negotiated under radically different political conditions; updating the regime would enhance legal clarity and reduce ambiguity in areas such as riverine management, border demarcation technologies, and cross-border resource exploitation. Second, contemporary security challenges—including non-state armed actors, smuggling networks, and environmental stressors—require integrated monitoring, intelligence-sharing, and crisis-management protocols that exceed the scope of earlier arrangements. Third, economic normalisa-tion and regional connectivity initiatives, particularly in the context of wider Gulf and Black Sea–to–Mediterranean trade corridors, necessitate a predictable and transparent border regime capable of supporting trade facilitation and infrastructure investment.

Fourth, few interstate rivalries in early modern history were as protracted and structurally conse-quential as that between the Ottoman and Safavid empires; indeed, aside from emblematic Euro-pean dyads such as Sweden and Denmark, scarcely any neighbouring polities fought with such frequency and geopolitical intensity. The Ottoman–Safavid wars were not episodic skirmishes but formative struggles that shaped imperial frontiers, sectarian geographies, and the political cartog-raphy of the Middle East. The eventual codification of their boundary—most notably through the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 and its later reaffirmations—laid the historical foundations of the con-temporary Irano–Iraqi frontier.

In this longue durée perspective, the modernisation and reaffirmation of the bilateral border re-gime would carry significance beyond technical adjustment. It would represent a conscious act of historical closure: an acknowledgment that a frontier once forged through imperial warfare can be sustained through law, mutual recognition, and institutionalised cooperation. By codifying and updating their mutual border arrangements, Iran and Iraq would signal both respect for their shared historical inheritance and a deliberate commitment to transcend its conflictual legacies.

Such a gesture would resonate in a Middle East increasingly characterised by interdependence, infrastructural connectivity, transnational energy corridors, and the recalibration of regional alignments. In an era defined less by territorial revisionism and more by economic diversification, demographic pressures, and environmental constraints, the stabilisation of borders becomes a pre-condition for sustainable statecraft. A modernised Irano–Iraqi border regime would therefore not only consolidate bilateral relations but also

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project an image of political maturity: two successor states to once-competing empires choosing legal rationality and cooperative security over inherit-ed antagonism.

In this sense, modernisation is not merely technical but strategic. A stabilised and institutionalised Irano–Iraqi border regime would reduce the probability of militarised disputes, anchor bilateral relations in law rather than expediency, and contribute to a more coherent regional security archi-tecture. The border, historically a site of rivalry, could thus evolve into a platform for structured coexistence and regulated interdependence.

Preamble

The Republic of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter referred to as "the Parties"),

- Recognizing the historical framework of border agreements, including the Treaty of Erzu-rum (1847), the Constantinople Protocol (1913), and the Algiers Accord (1975);
- Affirming their commitment to the principles of sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and non-interference;
- Acknowledging relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions on border govern-ance, conflict prevention, and international norms regarding state sovereignty;
- Conscious of contemporary challenges including non-state actors, transnational smuggling, politicized religious networks, and environmental degradation of shared resources, particu-larly in the Shatt al-Arab basin;
- Desiring to enhance regional security, promote economic cooperation, protect the envi-ronment, and facilitate cultural and social exchange;

Have agreed as follows:

Article 1: Definitions

For purposes of this Treaty, the following terms shall have the meanings indicated:

1. Border incident: any unauthorized crossing, confrontation, or security event occurring within the defined border zone.
2. Militant activity: armed or violent action by non-state actors that threatens the sovereignty or security of either Party.
3. Joint patrol: coordinated monitoring and enforcement activity conducted by the Parties' security forces along the border.
4. Resource corridor: areas designated for the cooperative management, extraction, or transport of natural resources.

Article 2: Border Delimitation

1. The Parties reaffirm the international boundary as recognized under prior agreements, up-dated according to contemporary geospatial mapping and satellite imagery.
2. Updated maps and coordinates, annexed to this Treaty as Annex A, shall be mutually rec-ognized and binding.

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3. Special attention shall be given to contested areas such as the Shatt al-Arab, accounting for hydrological changes, urban development, and environmental factors.

Article 3: Security Cooperation

1. The Parties shall establish joint patrols and integrated surveillance systems along high-risk border sectors.
2. Bilateral security posts shall be deployed in agreed locations.
3. Protocols for rapid response, intelligence sharing, and coordinated counter-insurgency op-erations shall be implemented.
4. Security cooperation shall extend to cyber monitoring, financial tracking, and anti-smuggling operations.

Article 4: Resource Management

1. The Parties shall form joint commissions for the management of water resources, oil fields, agricultural lands, and other shared natural resources.
2. Revenue from shared resource exploitation shall be subject to transparent accounting, third-party audits, and mutually agreed allocation mechanisms.
3. Environmental monitoring and protection programs shall be conducted collaboratively.

Article 5: Trade and Transit Facilitation

1. Customs procedures and tariffs shall be harmonized to facilitate cross-border trade.
2. The Parties shall develop joint infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges, logistics hubs, and transport corridors.
3. Special economic zones, industrial parks, and trade facilitation measures shall be explored as instruments of bilateral economic integration.

Article 6: Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

1. A standing bilateral commission shall be established to investigate border incidents, medi-ate disputes, and recommend binding arbitration.
2. The commission shall operate independently of political influence and in accordance with agreed procedural rules.
3. Regional observers or neutral third parties may be invited to support dispute resolution when necessary.

Article 7: Environmental Protection

1. The Parties shall implement joint initiatives for pollution control, waste management, bio-diversity preservation, and sustainable resource use.
2. Climate resilience planning, including flood mitigation and drought response, shall be in-tegrated into border management.
3. Annual environmental reports shall be prepared and shared with both governments.

Article 8: Social and Cultural Cooperation

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1. The Parties shall protect the rights and welfare of border communities, including access to education, healthcare, and legal services.
2. Cultural exchange programs and facilitation of religious pilgrimages shall be promoted.
3. Minority rights and cross-border community engagement shall be safeguarded.

Article 9: Implementation, Monitoring, and Review

1. A timetable with benchmarks for progress and regular reporting shall be established.
2. Bilateral meetings, technical subcommittees, and expert working groups shall monitor treaty implementation.
3. Mechanisms for public reporting and transparency shall be maintained.

Article 10: Amendment, Suspension, and Termination

1. Amendments to this Treaty may be made by mutual consent and formal written agreement.
2. Suspension or termination may only occur under clearly defined conditions, with prior consultation and agreed safeguards.
3. Unilateral abrogation is prohibited.

Article 11: Strategic Integration

1. The Parties acknowledge that territorial disputes, resource allocation, security, political in-fluence, and economic interests are interlinked and must be addressed holistically.
2. The border shall be treated as a shared interface of sovereignty, commerce, culture, and se-curity, and cooperation shall be proactive rather than reactive.

Final Provisions

1. This Treaty shall enter into force on the date of signature.
2. Ratification shall follow the constitutional procedures of each Party.
3. Copies of this Treaty shall be deposited with the United Nations Secretariat for registra-tion.

Signed at [City], on [Date], in two original copies in Arabic and Persian, both texts being equally authentic.

For the Republic of Iraq: _____

For the Islamic Republic of Iran: _____

Annex 1: Border Delimitation and Coordinates

I. General Principles

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1. The Parties reaffirm the international boundary as established under historical agreements: the Treaty of Erzurum (1847), the Constantinople Protocol (1913), and the Algiers Accord (1975).
2. The boundary shall be defined using contemporary geospatial mapping, GPS coordinates, and satellite imagery to ensure precision and verifiability.
3. The Parties recognize that hydrological, ecological, and urban developments, particularly in the Shatt al-Arab basin, may affect the physical border and shall be monitored jointly.

II. Border Sections

The border is divided into five operational sections for clarity in management, monitoring, and security deployment.

1. Northern Section – Zagros foothills to the Tigris River:

- Coordinates: From [Latitude X1, Longitude Y1] to [Latitude X2, Longitude Y2]
- Description: Mountainous terrain, lightly populated, susceptible to smuggling and militant transit.

2. Tigris River Section – Along the Tigris from Northern Section to Baghdad Governorate:

- Coordinates: [Lat/Long X3/Y3] to [Lat/Long X4/Y4]
- Description: Key waterway, high civilian population density, requires joint navigation protocols.

3. Central Section – Baghdad to Basra Governorate borderlands:

- Coordinates: [Lat/Long X5/Y5] to [Lat/Long X6/Y6]
- Description: Mixed urban-rural environment, major trade routes, agricultural zones, and militia activity hotspots.

4. Shatt al-Arab Section – Confluence of Tigris and Euphrates to the Persian Gulf:

- Coordinates: [Lat/Long X7/Y7] to [Lat/Long X8/Y8]
- Description: Strategic waterway for navigation, energy transport, and shared oil fields. Requires joint patrols and hydrological monitoring.

5. Southern Coastal Section – Shatt al-Arab estuary to Gulf coastline:

- Coordinates: [Lat/Long X9/Y9] to [Lat/Long X10/Y10]
- Description: Includes ports, wetlands, and border communities. High strategic and economic significance.

III. Verification and Monitoring

1. Both Parties shall maintain joint geospatial databases and satellite imagery repositories.

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2. Border markers and observation posts shall be mutually verified annually.
3. Any physical or environmental changes affecting the boundary shall be reported to the bi-lateral border commission within 30 days.

IV. Dispute Management

1. Minor coordinate disputes shall be resolved by technical subcommittees within the joint border commission.
2. Major disputes shall be escalated to Article 6 mechanisms of the main Treaty for arbitra-tion.

Annex II: Joint Security and Patrol Operations

I. Objectives

1. Ensure the security of the border by preventing militant infiltration, smuggling, and unau-thorized crossings.
2. Promote cooperation between the Parties' security forces through integrated operations.
3. Establish rapid response capabilities to border incidents.

II. Operational Framework

1. Joint Patrols:

- Each border section (as per Annex I) shall have at least one joint patrol unit com-prising personnel from both Parties.
- Patrols shall operate on a continuous schedule, alternating daytime and nighttime shifts.

2. Surveillance Systems:

- Integrated CCTV, radar, and drone monitoring along high-risk sections, particularly the Shatt al-Arab.
- Shared access to satellite imagery and geospatial data via secure bilateral plat-forms.

3. Border Posts and Rapid Response Teams:

- High-risk areas shall host bilateral security posts.
- Rapid response teams shall be trained and equipped to respond to incidents within two hours.

III. Intelligence and Coordination

1. Joint intelligence-sharing mechanisms shall include cyber monitoring, financial tracking, and smuggling interdiction data.
2. Monthly coordination meetings shall review incidents, patrol outcomes, and threat assess-ments.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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Annex III: Resource Management and Environmental Cooperation

I. Shared Water and Hydrology

1. Joint monitoring of the Shatt al-Arab water flow and water quality.
2. Equitable allocation of water resources for agriculture, industry, and urban needs.

II. Oil, Gas, and Mineral Resources

1. Creation of a Joint Resource Commission to oversee shared oil and gas fields.
2. Revenue-sharing agreements with third-party audits to ensure transparency.
3. Environmental and safety protocols for extraction, transport, and industrial operations.

III. Environmental Protection

1. Pollution control and waste management programs coordinated across border communi-ties.
2. Biodiversity preservation and wetland protection initiatives.
3. Climate resilience plans for flood mitigation, drought response, and desertification preven-tion.

Annex IV: Trade, Transit, and Economic Integration

I. Trade Facilitation

1. Harmonized customs procedures, tariffs, and documentation requirements.
2. Simplified inspection and approval processes for commercial goods.

II. Infrastructure Development

1. Joint planning of cross-border roads, bridges, logistics hubs, and transport corridors.
2. Development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and joint industrial parks along the bor-der.

III. Economic Cooperation

1. Encouragement of private-sector partnerships and bilateral investment in border regions.
2. Periodic evaluation of trade flows and infrastructure efficiency by a joint economic com-mittee.

Annex V: Conflict Resolution and Social-Cultural Cooperation

I. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

1. Establish a Standing Bilateral Border Commission with authority to investigate inci-dents, mediate disputes, and recommend arbitration.
2. Minor incidents resolved by technical subcommittees; major disputes escalated to high-level arbitration.

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Volume: 09, Issue: 01 January - February 2026

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3. Optional involvement of neutral regional observers or international facilitators.

II. Social and Cultural Initiatives

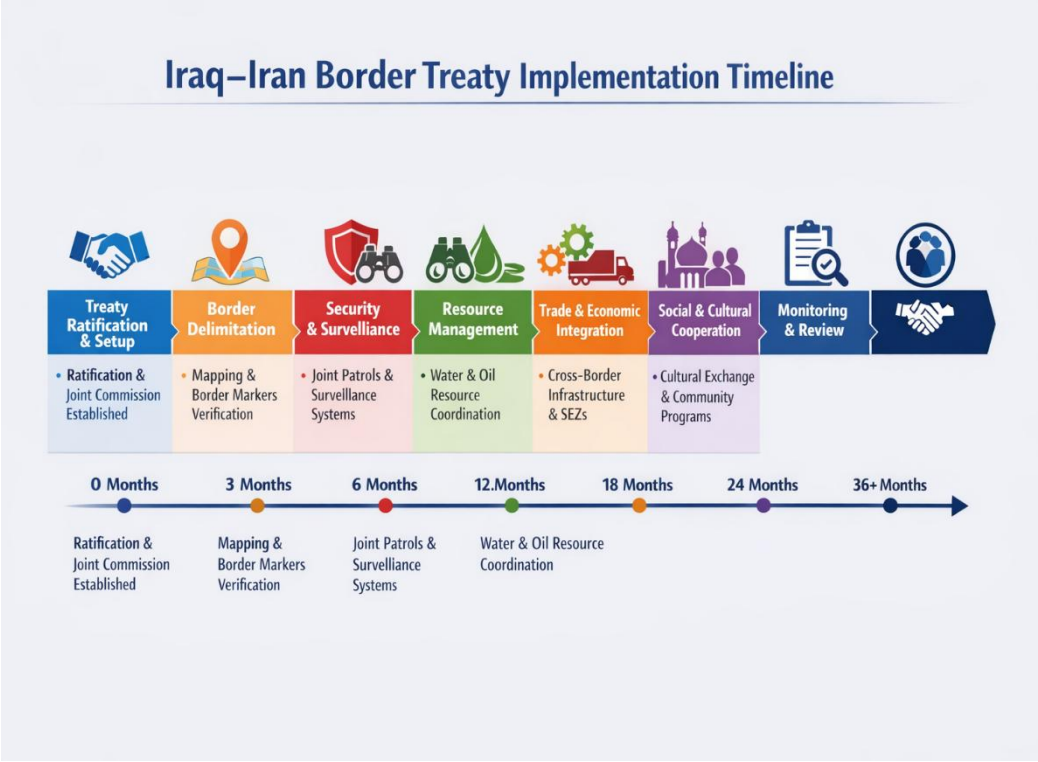
1. Protection of border community rights: access to education, healthcare, and legal protec-tion.
2. Facilitation of religious pilgrimages, cultural exchange programs, and minority rights pro-tection.
3. Promotion of joint cultural, sports, and community projects to foster trust and social cohe-sion.

Implementation Timeline and Monitoring Framework

Phase 1: Treaty Ratification and Institutional Setup (Months 0–3)

During this phase, the treaty is ratified by both countries, and the institutional framework is estab-lished. The Joint Border Commission and its technical subcommittees are created, and the heads for security, resource management, economic integration, and cultural cooperation are appointed. Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Interior are responsible for overseeing these activities.

Figure



Phase 2: Border Delimitation and Verification (Months 3–6)

This phase involves deploying geospatial mapping teams to verify and update the border in ac-cordance with Annex I. Physical border markers and observation posts are installed and

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verified. Joint field inspections are conducted in high-risk zones, including the Shatt al-Arab and Zagros foothills. The Joint Border Commission and technical survey teams are responsible for implemen-tation.

Phase 3: Security and Surveillance Operationalization (Months 6–12)

Joint patrols commence along the five operational border sections. Integrated surveillance sys-tems, including drones, CCTV, and radar, are launched. Rapid response units are trained and de-ployed, and monthly intelligence coordination meetings are held to ensure seamless cooperation. Border security forces and the Joint Security Subcommittee oversee these operations.

Phase 4: Resource Management Activation (Months 6–18)

The Joint Resource Commission is established to coordinate shared water, oil, gas, and mineral resources. Water allocation plans are implemented and environmental monitoring initiated, par-ticularly in the Shatt al-Arab basin. Audit and revenue-sharing procedures for natural resources are activated, and joint environmental protection initiatives are launched. Ministries of Energy, Environment, Agriculture, and the Joint Resource Commission are responsible for this phase.

Phase 5: Trade, Transit, and Economic Integration (Months 12–24)

Customs procedures and tariffs are harmonized to facilitate cross-border trade. Cross-border in-frastructure, including bridges, roads, and logistics hubs, is constructed or upgraded. Special Eco-nomic Zones (SEZs) and joint industrial parks are established, and trade-flow evaluations are con-ducted periodically. Ministries of Commerce, Infrastructure, and the Joint Economic Committee oversee this phase.

Phase 6: Social-Cultural Cooperation and Public Engagement (Months 12–24)

Cultural exchange programs and facilitation of religious pilgrimages are launched. Minority and border-community rights programs, including healthcare, education, and legal protection, are im-plemented. Community trust-building initiatives, such as sports events, festivals, and local pro-jects, are promoted. Ministries of Culture, Religious Affairs, and Social Welfare are responsible for this phase.

Phase 7: Monitoring, Review, and Adjustment (Months 24+)

Annual joint review meetings are conducted by the Joint Border Commission. Technical audits of security, trade, environmental, and resource management operations are performed. Procedures, protocols, and operational plans are adjusted as necessary. Public reporting and transparency up-dates ensure accountability. The Joint Border Commission and its technical subcommittees over-see these activities.

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Statement on AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) transforms how we live, work, and interact with the world around us. Its applications span across various fields, from healthcare and education to finance and entertainment, offering unprecedented opportunities for innovation and efficiency.In this piece, we leveraged AI to enhance our capabilities and deliver better outcomes. AI is based on human prompts that create personalized context by recycling and analyzing information stored in digital media, automating routine tasks, and providing insights that would be challenging to uncover manually. By integrating AI into our processes, we aim to improve accuracy, efficiency, and overall productivity towards problem-solving and cultivation of human relationships.

We believe that AI should augment human abilities, not replace them, and we strive to maintain a balance between automation and human oversight, scholarly contribution, and speedy delivery. LLMs are learning machines that wield autonomous power and confer a feeling of paste and glue to the text, which tends to overwhelm the nuance, intricateness, and emotional connectivity of human language.

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