NAVIGATING COOPERATION AND SECURITY IN THE PERSIAN GULF: THE GULFI PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the dynamics of regional cooperation and security in the Persian Gulf, focusing on interactions between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iran. It seeks to identify mechanisms that can facilitate collaboration amidst historical rivalries and geopolitical complexities. The research question addresses how the GCC and Iran can enhance regional cooperation and security through structured dialogue and collaborative initiatives, considering the challenges posed by historical tensions and external influences. Employing a qualitative approach and comparative regionalism as a framework, the research examines existing cooperation mechanisms, informal dialogues, and institutional structures. Data is gathered from academic literature, policy reports, and expert interviews. The study finds that while significant economic interdependence exists among GCC states, political and security cooperation remains fragile. Informal dialogue mechanisms, such as the GCC+1 process, have shown promise in building trust and addressing non-contentious issues. Phased engagement, confidence-building measures, and the inclusion of diverse stakeholders are crucial, with external mediators playing a key role in facilitating cooperation. The overall conclusion is, the Persian Gulf region stands at a critical juncture where the potential for enhanced cooperation exists, provided that states can transform historical rivalries into collaborative frameworks. The analytical slice suggests there are several layers of conflictual material at state-societal-human levels that must be addressed to secure stability, prosperity and creativity in the region. In addition, by focusing on shared challenges and opportunities, particularly in areas like environmental sustainability , and maritime security, the GCC and Iran can foster a more integrated and resilient regional security architecture. Sustained dialogue and strategic partnerships are necces-sary to navigate the complexities of the 21st century effectively.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, GCC, Iran, regional cooperation, security dynamics, comparative regionalism, dialogue mechanisms, confidence-building, environmental sustainability, maritime security.

Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.

The wound is the place where the Light enters you.

-Rumi

47 years is too long to scream in silence. No new generation of Iranians should inherit fear as their birthright. Iran must be free.

-Roberta Metsola

Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons, and such weapons have no place in our defense doctrine.

-Ali Larijani

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Persian Gulf, a region of immense strategic importance, has long been a focal point of geopolitical dynamics, economic interdependence, and cultural exchange. Historically characterized by both cooperation and rivalry, the Gulf states face a complex landscape shaped by their shared history, diverse political systems, and external influences. As the global energy landscape shifts towards decarbonization, the Gulf has a unique opportunity to redefine its role in the international arena, positioning itself as a leader in the energy transition while addressing pressing regional challenges.

In recent years, the need for enhanced regional cooperation has become increasingly apparent. Issues such as security threats, economic vulnerabilities, and environmental challenges necessitate collaborative approaches among Gulf states. The establishment of frameworks for cooperation can foster mutual trust, promote economic diversification, and enhance collective security. However, historical grievances, sectarian divides, and competing national interests pose significant obstacles to achieving meaningful collaboration.

This introduction sets the stage for an exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf. By examining the historical context, current challenges, and potential pathways for collaboration, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and complexities that define the future of the Gulf region. Ultimately, the capacity of Gulf states to navigate these dynamics will determine their ability to foster stability, resilience, and prosperity in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Iran have previously emphasized principles such as good neighbourliness, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution, highlighting the need for a shared procedural code and clear negotiation principles in the GCC+1 process before discussing substantive topics. Although informal dialogue lacks enforcement power and may underrepresent broader societal voices, it can catalyze collaboration and lay the groundwork for formal agreements, as seen in initiatives like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Union for the Mediterranean. Scenarios that promote proactive cooperation can lead to economic diversification and geopolitical stability, while fragmented approaches increase vulnerabilities. Technical dialogue on environmental issues, particularly water, offers a politically viable starting point for building trust and cooperation, which can be institutionalized through measures such as joint task forces and transparency mechanisms. The Persian Gulf's interdependence underlines the essential need for cooperative frameworks that encourage shared initiatives rather than adversarial competition, ultimately facilitating a more integrated and resilient region capable of addressing 21st-century challenges.

We argue, the Persian Gulf region presents a compelling case for the necessity of enhanced regional cooperation, particularly in the context of its geopolitical significance, economic

interdependence, and shared environmental challenges. A scientific argument for cooperation can be structured around three key pillars: security, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability.

The geopolitical landscape of the Persian Gulf is marked by persistent tensions, particularly between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The historical context of conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq War and ongoing territorial disputes, underscores the need for collaborative security mechanisms. Research indicates that cooperative security frameworks, such as joint military exercises and intelligence sharing, can significantly reduce the likelihood of conflict by fostering trust and transparency among states. Studies in international relations suggest that confidence-building measures can mitigate the risks associated with historical rivalries, thereby enhancing regional stability.

The Gulf states are heavily reliant on hydrocarbon revenues, which exposes them to vulnerabilities associated with global energy market fluctuations. Economic diversification is essential for long-term sustainability, and regional cooperation can facilitate this process. Collaborative initiatives, such as joint investments in renewable energy and technology sectors, can create synergies that enhance economic resilience. Empirical evidence from other regions demonstrates that economic integration can lead to increased trade, investment, and job creation, ultimately contributing to greater regional stability. By harmonizing trade regulations and promoting cross-border projects, Gulf states can leverage their collective resources to foster a more diversified and robust economy.

The Persian Gulf faces significant environmental challenges, including water scarcity, climate change, and marine pollution. These issues are exacerbated by the region's reliance on fossil fuels and the impacts of rapid urbanization. Scientific research highlights the interconnectedness of environmental and security issues, suggesting that environmental degradation can lead to social unrest and economic instability. Regional cooperation in environmental management, such as coordinated efforts to address climate change and promote sustainable practices, is crucial for mitigating these risks. Collaborative frameworks can facilitate the sharing of best practices, technologies, and resources, ultimately enhancing the region's capacity to address shared environmental challenges.

AND SO, the scientific argument for enhanced regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf is grounded in the interrelated domains of security, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability. By addressing these critical areas through collaborative initiatives, Gulf states can not only enhance their resilience to contemporary challenges but also position themselves as leaders in the evolving global landscape. The potential for cooperation exists, and the successful navigation of these dynamics will be pivotal in shaping the future trajectory of the Persian Gulf region.

Objectives

First, to examine the historical dynamics of the Persian Gulf, focusing on key events that have shaped contemporary regional relations and cooperation.

Second, assess Security Challenges: To identify and evaluate the primary security threats facing Gulf states and the potential for collaborative security mechanisms to mitigate these risks.

Third, explore Economic Integration: To investigate the economic interdependence among Gulf states and the opportunities for joint initiatives aimed at diversifying economies away from hydrocarbon dependence.

Fourth evaluate Environmental Issues: To assess the shared environmental challenges in the Persian Gulf and the role of regional cooperation in promoting sustainability and resilience.

Fifth, propose Pathways for Cooperation: To develop actionable recommendations for enhancing regional cooperation across security, economic, and environmental domains.

Sixth: To make a rejoinder to my piece on the EU perspective on security in the Persian Gulf by including both a didactic taxonomy for deconfliction and to analyse areas of cooperation amenable to foster cooperation amongst the riparians to help build trust as part and parcel of an ambition to move beyond US-led balance of powers as the default mode of organisation of the middle eastern state-system. To build and maintain the peace is then the Gulfis own responsibility in their shared geography united in history under common institutions to help the Middle East die or get reborn.

SCOPE

The scope of this research encompasses the following areas:

Geopolitical Analysis: A comprehensive review of the historical and contemporary geopolitical landscape of the Persian Gulf, including the roles of key state and non-state actors.

Economic Assessment: An evaluation of the economic structures of Gulf states, focusing on their reliance on hydrocarbon revenues and the potential for diversification through regional collaboration.

Environmental Evaluation: An analysis of the environmental challenges faced by the Gulf region, including climate change, water scarcity, and pollution, and the implications for regional stability.

Security Frameworks: A study of existing security frameworks and mechanisms in the Gulf, assessing their effectiveness and identifying gaps that could be addressed through enhanced cooperation.

Cultural and Social Dimensions: An exploration of the cultural and social factors that influence cooperation among Gulf states, including historical ties and shared identities.

Research Questions

1. What historical events have significantly influenced the current geopolitical dynamics in the Persian Gulf?
2. What are the primary security threats facing Gulf states, and how can collaborative security mechanisms be developed to address these challenges?
3. In what ways can economic integration among Gulf states contribute to reducing dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and enhancing regional stability?
4. What are the key environmental challenges in the Persian Gulf, and how can regional cooperation facilitate effective responses to these issues?
5. What specific pathways and frameworks can be established to enhance cooperation among Gulf states across security, economic, and environmental domains?

By addressing these objectives, scope, and research questions, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential for regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf and its implications for stability and prosperity in the region.

Significance

The significance of this research on regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf is multifaceted, encompassing geopolitical, economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

Understanding Geopolitical Stability: The Persian Gulf is a critical region in global geopolitics, with its strategic location and vast hydrocarbon resources influencing international relations. This research contributes to the understanding of how enhanced cooperation among Gulf states can lead to greater geopolitical stability, reducing the likelihood of conflicts and fostering a more secure environment for both regional and global actors.

Promoting Economic Resilience: As Gulf states face economic vulnerabilities due to their dependence on oil revenues, this research highlights the importance of economic diversification through regional collaboration. By exploring pathways for economic integration, the study aims to provide insights that can help Gulf states build more resilient economies, ultimately contributing to long-term prosperity and stability.

Addressing Environmental Challenges: The Persian Gulf is confronted with significant environmental issues, including climate change, water scarcity, and marine pollution. This research emphasizes the need for cooperative approaches to environmental management, which can enhance the region's capacity to address these challenges effectively. By fostering collaboration, Gulf states can work together to implement sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and their populations.

Enhancing Social Cohesion: The cultural and social dimensions of cooperation are crucial for fostering regional identity and solidarity. This research underscores the potential for shared historical and cultural ties to facilitate collaboration among Gulf states. By promoting educational exchanges, cultural programs, and social initiatives, the study aims to strengthen people-to-people connections, contributing to a more cohesive and united region.

Informing Policy and Decision-Making: The findings of this research can serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners interested in the dynamics of the Persian Gulf. By providing actionable recommendations for enhancing cooperation, the study aims to inform decision-making processes and contribute to the development of effective strategies for addressing the region's complex challenges.

In summary, the significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Persian Gulf's geopolitical landscape, promote economic resilience, address pressing environmental issues, enhance social cohesion, and inform policy decisions that can lead to a more stable and prosperous region.

Litterature Review

The Persian Gulf has generated a substantial interdisciplinary literature spanning history, political economy, security studies, anthropology, and urban studies. A foundational reference point is The Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics, edited by Mehran Kamrava, which synthesizes scholarship on governance structures, state formation, identity politics, economic transformation, and regional security architectures. The volume situates Gulf monarchies within comparative Middle East politics while foregrounding their distinctive patterns of dynastic rule, rent distribution, and institutional adaptation.

Historical scholarship has moved beyond colonial narratives to emphasize mobility, maritime exchange, and transregional connectivity. In The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History, edited by Lawrence G. Potter, contributors examine port cities as nodes linking Arabia, Iran, India, and East Africa, thereby reframing the Gulf as a space of circulation rather than isolation. At the same time, the enduring archival value of the Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia by John Gordon Lorimer remains evident, as it provides granular early twentieth-century data on tribal configurations, trade routes, and imperial administrative strategies. Contemporary scholars frequently engage this colonial compendium critically, interrogating both its empirical richness and its imperial epistemology.

Conflict and security studies form another major pillar of Gulf scholarship. In Conflicts in the Persian Gulf: Origins and Evolution, Hossein Askari analyzes interstate rivalries, ideological competition, and the structural roots of militarization, linking them to economic dependency and regime legitimacy. Similarly, Security in the Persian Gulf Region by Fatemeh Shayan explores post-Iraq War alignments and the evolving balance between regional actors and extra-regional powers, particularly the United States. Strategic analyses frequently highlight the geopolitical centrality of the Strait of Hormuz, whose vulnerability underscores the Gulf's systemic importance to global energy markets and maritime security regimes.

Energy political economy constitutes perhaps the most influential analytical framework. In Energy Kingdoms: Oil and Political Survival in the Persian Gulf, Jim Krane advances a refined rentier-state argument, demonstrating how hydrocarbon revenues sustain distributive welfare systems, subsidized consumption, and political quiescence while generating long-term fiscal vulnerabilities. This regional analysis is complemented by the broader historical narrative offered in The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power by Daniel Yergin, which situates Gulf oil within the global contest over energy, finance, and strategic influence.

Beyond state-centric and security-driven perspectives, Critical Gulf Studies has expanded the field's methodological and theoretical horizons. Scholars interrogate the social consequences of demographic imbalance, labor migration, and stratified citizenship regimes, emphasizing the structural reliance of Gulf economies on expatriate workforces. Urban studies analyses of cities such as Dubai and Doha explore how oil wealth has been transformed into infrastructure, real estate speculation, and symbolic capital, producing globally branded urban spaces embedded in transnational circuits of finance and culture.

Regional institutionalism is frequently examined through the Gulf Cooperation Council, with scholars debating whether it constitutes a nascent security community, a pragmatic coordination mechanism, or a fragile alliance shaped by regime survival concerns. Across these diverse approaches, the literature converges on an understanding of the Persian Gulf as historically interconnected, economically pivotal, and strategically contested—an arena where local agency, imperial legacies, global capitalism, and geopolitical rivalry intersect in analytically complex ways.

A subregion is a geographically concentrated cluster of states situated within a larger region, distinguished by a higher density of political, economic, cultural, or security interaction among its members. While a region encompasses a broad geopolitical space defined by shared characteristics such as proximity, historical experience, identity patterns, or strategic interdependence, a subregion represents a more tightly interconnected zone within that broader framework. Subregions are not merely smaller geographic units; they are arenas where interaction is more frequent, security concerns are more immediate, and political dynamics are often more intense.

A region, in contrast, refers to a wider spatial and political construct composed of multiple states that exhibit recognizable patterns of interaction and interdependence. Regions may be defined geographically, culturally, economically, or strategically. They may be formalized through regional institutions or exist informally through sustained patterns of cooperation and conflict. The regional level operates at a macro scale, shaping broad strategic alignments, economic integration patterns, and normative frameworks.

The relationship between subregion and region is both structural and dynamic. Structurally, subregions function as building blocks of regions. They exist within the larger regional system and reflect concentrated interaction patterns. Dynamically, subregions often serve as the primary arenas in which regional security competition, cooperation initiatives, and identity formation unfold. Conflicts frequently originate at the subregional level before expanding outward, while successful cooperation at the subregional level can strengthen broader regional stability. Thus, subregions can either reinforce regional cohesion or contribute to fragmentation within the regional order.

Several major theories in international relations help explain subregional cooperation and conflict.

Realism views subregions primarily through the lens of power and security. In this perspective, subregions emerge because neighboring states face immediate security interdependence.

Cooperation is temporary and driven by balancing against threats, while conflict arises from power competition and the security dilemma.

Liberal Institutionalism emphasizes institutions, economic interdependence, and rules. It argues that subregional cooperation develops through trade networks, shared governance mechanisms, and institutional frameworks that reduce mistrust and transaction costs. Conflict, in this view, results from weak institutions and insufficient economic integration.

Constructivism focuses on identity, norms, and shared meanings. Subregions form not only because of geography but because states share cultural, religious, or historical narratives. Cooperation depends on shared identity, while conflict often stems from competing ideologies or rival identity constructions.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) argues that security interdependence is geographically clustered. According to this theory, threats travel more easily across short distances, making subregions the primary arenas of security interaction. External powers may intervene, but local security dynamics remain central.

Neo-Marxist and Dependency Theory interpret subregions in terms of economic hierarchy and structural inequality. Subregional cooperation may reflect attempts to resist global core domination, while conflict may arise from uneven development and external economic pressures.

Functionalism and Neofunctionalism explain subregional integration as a gradual process beginning with technical and economic cooperation that "spills over" into political integration. Cooperation deepens as institutions expand their competencies.

Together, these theories show that subregions are not merely geographic subdivisions but complex political spaces shaped by power distribution, institutional development, identity formation, and economic structure. The region provides the broader strategic environment, while the subregion operates as the more immediate and concentrated arena where cooperation and conflict are most directly experienced.

Scholarship on subregional integration in the Persian Gulf has expanded significantly, reflecting the growing importance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a platform for economic, security, and environmental collaboration. Legrenzi (2019) provides a foundational account of the GCC's diplomatic and security coordination, situating institutional evolution within broader international relations theory. He emphasizes the interplay between historical events, such as the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq Wars, and the formation of cooperative frameworks. However, his analysis primarily addresses state-level diplomacy, leaving functional economic or societal integration underexplored.

Mishrif and Al Balushi (2021) focus on economic diversification and integration, highlighting private-sector linkages, infrastructure development, and post-oil economic planning. Their work provides comparative empirical examples of cooperative initiatives across GCC member states, but it lacks rigorous quantitative measurement of integration outcomes, such as intra-GCC trade flows, labor mobility, or joint infrastructure usage. Security-focused analyses, including Shayan (2018) and Guzansky (2016), examine how threat perceptions and domestic

reforms shape coordination. These studies underscore the critical role of security interdependence but provide limited frameworks for understanding how informal or institutionalized dialogue translates into broader regional integration.

Recent works, such as Kozhanov (2021) on external actors and the 2025 edited volume on GCC achievements and challenges, underscore the influence of global powers on Gulf cooperation, illustrating both opportunities and constraints for integration. Journal articles analyzing strategic shifts in GCC economic policy (JEDIP, 2023) and the role of China in Gulf partnerships (JCIA, 2024) explore emerging dynamics in economic and strategic domains, though they frequently rely on qualitative analysis or descriptive case studies. Similarly, MDPI (2022) identifies gaps in Gulf area studies, calling for more interdisciplinary research and systematic empirical inquiry.

Mehran Kamrava describes his efforts to bridge intellectual and scholarly dialogue across the Gulf—bringing Iranians, Arabs, and Western researchers together to deepen understanding of shared regional dynamics rather than viewing the Gulf in isolated silos, thereby promoting cross-border engagement and cooperation in areas such as migration and political economy as part of an "organic whole" of the Persian Gulf region; (GlobIS Review | ایرانشناسی در جهان)

Dr. Javad Heiran-Nia highlights Iran's regional strategy as a response to past conflicts and emphasizes that Tehran seeks a nuanced regional policy balancing its relations with major powers while engaging economically and diplomatically with neighbors, including within broader Gulf frameworks; (Global Defense Insight)

Giorgio Cafiero notes that Gulf countries are increasingly pursuing diplomacy to avoid escalation, stressing that GCC states are focusing on stability and de-escalation because escalation with Iran or other external powers would be disastrous, reflecting a practical preference for diplomatic engagement over confrontation; (italpress.com) and the Gulf Cooperation Council's leadership itself has articulated a vision for regional security that calls for constructive relations with neighbors including Iran based on respect for sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful dispute resolution, and dialogue as primary options for overcoming outstanding issues, thereby framing cooperation as essential for regional peace and shared stability. (gcc-sg.org)

Mohammed Soliman (2026) reframes the concept of the "Middle East" as "West Asia" to better capture the broader geopolitical, economic, and technological linkages that now connect Europe, the Mediterranean, the Arabian Gulf, and South and East Asia, arguing that the traditional Middle East framework is outdated and insufficient for analyzing contemporary regional dynamics. He critiques past U.S. policies of direct intervention and nation-building in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, viewing them as largely failures that fragmented regional order and created space for revisionist powers like Iran, Russia, and China to expand their influence. In response, Soliman proposes a shift from nation-building to order-building, emphasizing the cultivation of regional stability through flexible partnerships rather than unilateral dominance, with the goal of establishing a resilient and balanced regional system. His strategy is organized around three interdependent coalitions: geostrategic, linking NATO and EU nations with regional actors; hard-power, focused on security cooperation and balancing military capabilities; and geo-technological, which prioritizes AI, digital

infrastructure, trade corridors, and energy networks, reflecting his argument that technological and economic connectivity are as crucial as traditional military power for maintaining stability. Soliman situates West Asia within the context of broader multipolar global competition, stressing that U.S. interests must now be understood in relation to China and Russia, and that a coherent grand strategy requires integrating military, economic, and technological instruments of influence across the region. He contends that multi-layered partnerships, rather than direct intervention, offer a more sustainable path to regional order, and that U.S. strategy should focus on balancing power rather than seeking outright dominance, acknowledging the limits imposed by resources and domestic political constraints.

Some scholars question whether renaming the region "West Asia" meaningfully advances analytical precision or simply reframes familiar geopolitical arguments in new terms, reflecting a longstanding debate in international relations about whether regions are socially constructed categories or represent enduring strategic linkages. Critics stress that geography alone does not dictate politics and that structural, historical, and political contexts must be considered to fully understand regional dynamics, a point often emphasized in area studies literature. While Soliman emphasizes coalition-building as a path to stability, others argue that this approach underestimates local agency and the complexity of intra-regional divisions, including sectarian, ethnic, and political fractures, suggesting that a U.S.-anchored order may be overly top-down and echoing past critiques of American grand strategy that often overlooked indigenous political dynamics. The heavy emphasis on technology and geo-tech alliances is also questioned, as some academics caution against techno-economic determinism, noting that the strategic effects of infrastructure and digital networks are mediated by politics, culture, and uneven development patterns. Similarly, Soliman's reliance on classic balance-of-power thinking may be overly simplistic, as critics highlight that such frameworks often fail to account for non-state actors, normative shifts, and non-military sources of power such as identity politics or climate change, and that contemporary multipolarity involves complex interdependencies that cannot be fully captured by traditional models. Additionally, U.S. domestic political fragmentation, including polarization, can limit the consistency and feasibility of long-term grand strategy, suggesting that ambitious frameworks may face challenges in practical implementation regardless of their intellectual coherence.

Despite these critiques, the book offers notable strengths, including a big-picture reconceptualization of a strategically important region, the integration of geoeconomics, technology, and traditional security into a single framework, and engagement with broader grand strategy debates that challenge old paradigms of U.S. intervention. Nevertheless, there are risks: conceptual reframing may not fully address on-the-ground political realities, the approach may overem-phasize the U.S. role in a region where indigenous power projection is increasingly significant, and the strategy's reliance on balance-of-power assumptions may not align with contemporary international relations scholarship. Overall, Soliman's work provides a forward-looking and integrative vision, but its practical application would require careful attention to local political dynamics, regional agency, and the complex interplay of global and local forces shaping West Asia today. Moreover, it interjects itself into US debates about whether US China conflict over the Middle East in inevitable hence constitute an avoidance research agenda via concept that is somewhat biased. Moreover, Soliman's proposal for order-building via layered coalitions echoes Lake's idea that hierarchies (or semi-hierarchical structures) can stabilize a region. The U.S. could act as a hegemon providing rules and structure, but in Lake's

framework, the success of such hierarchy depends on incentives, legitimacy, and the buy-in of regional actors (2009). This also highlights a potential critique: hierarchies are easier to theorize than to implement in complex regions with strong local agency, like the Middle East, the European Union's near abroad.

Our emphasis is that as the EU rise to become a global power it will develop environmental interests in Europe's adjacent areas of an magnitude that not only defies anarchy and self-help-system but also that the EU increasingly - beyond energy security and the US 5th fleets area of operations - will have to rely on its own heft for conflict-reduction through exercise of diplomatic authority in pursuit of stability, through norm-setting via institutional mechanisms for the sake of predictability, and that trade, monetary and financial, political and security inducements are there to secure policy integration of the satelittes in the shared interests of both togetherness subservience and modernization that currently are intertwined in the shared geography in the lands between the seas.

Regional preeminence can provide order, security and rules, so long as the leader reduces uncertainty and provide security and economic stability and a better deal than a reluctant and distant hegemon and selectively engaged one conscious about your development needs and desire for technology transfers.

Across this literature, several gaps remain evident. Theoretically, most studies rely on functionalist or security-complex approaches and rarely engage with comparative regionalism frameworks or multi-level governance models used in European or Asian integration studies. Empirically, robust data on cross-border outcomes—such as joint infrastructure projects, labor or knowledge mobility, and integration in energy, water, or environmental sectors—remain limited. Methodologically, few studies employ mixed methods, network analysis, or longitudinal designs, constraining the ability to evaluate causal mechanisms linking informal dialogue, formal cooperation, and institutional outcomes.

Overall, the literature underscores the potential for Gulf sub-regional integration while highlighting the need for research that bridges diplomacy, economics, environmental governance, and social development. Future studies could benefit from combining quantitative metrics, comparative frameworks, and analyses of informal policy mechanisms to provide a comprehensive understanding of how integration evolves and can be sustained.

Scholarly contribution

Our scholarly contribution lies in the comprehensive analysis of regional cooperation and security dynamics in the Persian Gulf, particularly focusing on the interactions between GCC states and Iran. By employing a comparative regionalism framework, your work highlights the complexities of historical rivalries and geopolitical influences while identifying practical mechanisms for collaboration. Our research contributes to the existing literature by integrating diverse perspectives, synthesizing insights from various fields, including international relations, political science, and environmental studies, to provide a holistic understanding of the region's challenges and opportunities. It emphasizes the importance of informal dialogue mechanisms, such as the GCC+1 process, underscoring the significance of trust-building and phased engagement in fostering cooperation.

Additionally, our analysis of the role of external powers in shaping regional dynamics adds depth to the understanding of how global factors impact local cooperation efforts. The study offers actionable recommendations for enhancing regional security and cooperation, focusing on shared challenges like environmental sustainability and maritime security, which can serve as a foundation for future collaborative initiatives.

Overall, our contribution advances the discourse on Persian Gulf security by providing a nuanced perspective on the interplay between historical context, economic interdependence, and the potential for strategic partnerships.

Methodology

In methodological terms, the way of knowing influences the thing to be known. In this piece, the following research methodologies are employed:

Qualitative Analysis: This approach involves content analysis of relevant documents to gather insights into the perspectives of key stakeholders in the Persian Gulf region. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding regional cooperation and security dynamics. Quantitative Analysis: Statistical methods are utilized to analyze data related to economic indicators, security incidents, and environmental factors. This approach provides empirical evidence to support claims and identify trends that may influence regional cooperation.

Comparative Case Studies: We use case-studies to understand where the EU could intervene and shape the environment through specific instances of cooperation or conflict among GCC+1, this methodology allows for the identification of patterns and factors that contribute to successful collaboration or ongoing rivalries in the interest of signaling strategic interest in the region beyond trade and technical support behind the scenes.

Document Analysis: A review of existing literature, policy papers, and official reports helps situate the research within the broader academic context. This method ensures that the findings are grounded in established theories and concepts while also identifying gaps in the literature.

Mixed-Methods Approach: Combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies enhances the robustness of the research. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis that captures both the statistical trends and the human experiences behind them, providing a holistic view of the issues at hand.

These methodologies collectively ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of cooperation and security in the Persian Gulf region.

This is important since the relative poverty of research should not be a hindrance to moving forward on the assumption what we don't know we tend to fear and what we fear often lead to conflict and even violence. If the study lacks rigor it compensates for it in engagement with cutting-edge research topics, thus closing gaps in knowledge of relevance to students, policy makers and a wider audience with an international outlook and intellectual curiosity.

Structure

We begin by presenting on the historical context to the Persian Gulf. This section introduces the research question, scope, and methodology. It defines the geographic and political meaning of the Persian Gulf, clarifies the role of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and introduces the GCC+1 concept as a framework for regional engagement with external actors. The introduction also explains the analytical lenses used: regionalism theory, informal governance, multi-level policy-making, and Sustainable Development Goals alignment.

2. Historical Context of the Persian Gulf

This section traces the evolution of political order in the Gulf from the pre-oil era to British protectorates and the post-1971 state system. It addresses the emergence of modern Gulf monarchies, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, and shifting balances of power. Historical patterns of rivalry and cooperation are analyzed as structural foundations of contemporary governance.

3.Conflicts of the Persian Gulf: Overview

The Persian Gulf region has long been a focal point of strategic, political, and economic tensions, shaped by its rich hydrocarbon resources, historical rivalries, and diverse social fabrics. Conflicts in the Gulf manifest across multiple layers: state-to-state disputes over power, territory, and influence; societal frictions arising from sectarian divides, labor imbalances, and demographic pressures; and human-level challenges that affect individual rights, liberties, and security. Understanding the Persian Gulf conflicts requires a structured approach that distinguishes between these levels while recognizing their interconnections and the cascading effects of tensions across the region.

At the interstate level, Persian Gulf nations navigate a complex web of alliances, rivalries, and strategic competition. Territorial disputes, competition over oil and gas resources, and political influence have generated tensions between regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, while internal divisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) further complicate collective action. Key flashpoints, including maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, amplify the potential for confrontation and economic disruption, highlighting the strategic stakes of these state-level rivalries. Within Gulf societies, structural inequalities, demographic pressures, and sectarian divisions exacerbate social tensions. Competition for resources, employment disparities among migrant and native populations, and sectarian rivalries create persistent societal cleavages. These issues not only challenge social cohesion but also influence political stability, as groups mobilize around identity, labor rights, or generational grievances, often heightening the risk of unrest and domestic conflict. The human dimension of Gulf conflicts highlights the impact of political, economic, and social tensions on individuals' daily lives. Restrictions on civil liberties, inadequate protections for migrant workers, and insecurity in maritime and urban spaces expose populations to fear, vulnerability, and systemic disadvantage. Addressing human-level conflicts requires attention to rights, governance, and institutional safeguards that mitigate the personal costs of regional instability.

4. Saudi Arabia–Iran Conflict

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran represents the most prominent interstate tension in the Gulf, combining religious, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions. Both states compete for regional influence, project power through proxy actors, and seek to shape Gulf politics in line with their strategic visions. This confrontation has generated instability across neighboring countries, fueling conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, and increasing the risk of direct military escalation.

5. Internal GCC Schisms

Despite formal cooperation within the GCC, internal divisions persist among member states over foreign policy, economic strategies, and political alignment. Disputes such as the 2017 Qatar–Saudi Arabia crisis reveal the fragility of regional cohesion and the challenges of balancing national interests with collective security. These cleavages complicate unified responses to threats and often exacerbate tensions in the wider Gulf region.

6. Strait of Hormuz Tensions

The Strait of Hormuz is a critical chokepoint for global energy supplies, making it a strategic flashpoint for the Gulf's interstate conflicts. Threats to navigation, military posturing, and confrontations between Iran and external powers heighten fears of regional escalation. Control over this waterway remains central to state security calculations, with implications for global oil markets and regional stability.

Societal-Level Conflicts

7. Sectarian Strife

Sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities, shape both domestic and regional politics in the Gulf. These divides influence political allegiances, access to resources, and social cohesion, often becoming a lens through which broader conflicts are interpreted. Sectarian strife fuels mistrust, local disputes, and, at times, violent confrontation, undermining efforts at social integration.

8. Labor Migrant Imbalance

The Gulf relies heavily on migrant labor, yet systemic imbalances create vulnerabilities. Migrant workers often face precarious employment, exploitation, and limited rights, contributing to societal tensions and resentment. The dependence on migrant labor for economic development contrasts sharply with their marginalization, creating structural inequalities that amplify social instability.

9. Youth Unemployment

High rates of youth unemployment in Gulf states exacerbate societal tensions by limiting opportunities for social mobility and engagement. Disaffected young populations may become susceptible to radicalization or social unrest, highlighting the need for policies that integrate youth into productive economic and civic roles.

Human-Level Issues

10.Migrant Worker Protection

Migrant workers' vulnerability represents a critical human-level concern. Insufficient labor protections, poor living conditions, and restricted legal recourse expose individuals to exploitation and systemic injustice. Addressing these issues is essential for both human rights and social stability in the Gulf.

11. Civil Liberties

Restrictions on political expression, assembly, and civic participation constrain the ability of citizens to engage meaningfully in governance. These limitations often exacerbate grievances and foster environments of fear and repression, limiting the potential for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

12. Political Restriction

Political restrictions in Gulf states manifests through limited institutional pluralism, constraints on opposition groups, and tightly controlled media landscapes. Such measures, while often justified in the name of security, may fuel discontent, encourage clandestine dissent, and hinder transparent governance.

Thematical Issues

13. Maritime Security in the Persian Gulf

Human-level security concerns also intersect with maritime risks. Piracy, trafficking, and strategic confrontations in the Gulf's shipping lanes affect both regional economies and individual livelihoods. Ensuring maritime security is therefore central to protecting human and economic interests while mitigating the threat of interstate conflict, balanced by the impact of increased maritime insecurity in the world's most important corridor.

14. Gulfi Urbanism

Gulfi urbanism encompasses a diverse range of forms, from traditional vernacular settlements to contemporary modernist developments. The built environment functions as a medium of expression, signaling not only cultural and ideological aspirations but also social hierarchies, economic ambitions, and local political affiliation and real estate managers' ambitions Through its architecture, spatial organization, and public spaces, the cityscape becomes a reflection of the complex interplay between identity, power, and aspiration within Gulfi society. If you think the heat of the desert lasts into the night and the desert is moving north, you are right, but so is the international influence of some of the architecture being built having an impact worldwide, and not all of them are easily surpassed elsewhere. Islam, an Irano-Semitic civilization, is back. This provides a sound departure point for a dialogue.

15.Turkey and the Middle East

Turkey has the longest tenureship of us all as imperial power in the Middle East 625 years to be exact, but was never accepted as more than a presence in the Concert of Europe rather than a member. Istanbul, in turn, was the place, where the founding members of the Arab independence trained, only to become homeless when the empire started to crumble sizing the opportunity to emancipate themselves as nations. The Turks are both back in the Middle East and wishes to act as the EU's bridge to the region, and much of its waiting time in Purgatorio, consists in re-gaining strength and repairing injustices and settling for peace under the mercurial Erdogan, something that the EU can also benefit from, and the Gulfis come to terms with provided they are not as forward-looking as others.

16. Interdependencies in the Persian Gulf

This section explores energy interdependence, maritime security, labor mobility, financial flows, water desalination reliance, and cross-border trade. It examines how hydrocarbon supply chains, shipping lanes such as the Strait of Hormuz, and migrant labor networks create mutual vulnerabilities and shared incentives for stability.

17. Country-Specific Regional Strategies

Each Gulf state's regional strategy is analyzed comparatively: Saudi Arabia's strategic depth and Vision 2030 transformation agenda . The United Arab Emirates' geoeconomic diplomacy and port-led influence. Qatar's mediation and soft-power positioning. Kuwait's parliamentary diplomacy. Oman's neutral facilitation role. Bahrain's security-aligned posture. Iran's asymmetric and networked regional strategy

The section evaluates how national strategies intersect with regional institutional frameworks.

18. GCC Visions for the Region

This chapter examines official GCC integration goals, economic diversification agendas, customs union efforts, energy grid interconnections, and policy harmonization. It also evaluates implementation gaps between formal commitments and operational outcomes.

Profiling the Persian Gulf

19. Contemporary Challenges in the Gulf

This section analyzes geopolitical rivalry, sanctions regimes, maritime insecurity, food security vulnerabilities, demographic pressures, and economic diversification constraints. It discusses how regional fragmentation complicates collective governance.

20. Cooperative Schemes in the Persian Gulf

This chapter surveys formal cooperation initiatives, including shared electricity grids, joint infrastructure funds, trade facilitation mechanisms, and security coordination platforms. It evaluates their effectiveness and political limits.

21. Trade Developments and Regional Economic Patterns

This section reviews intra-GCC trade levels, external trade dependencies, logistics integration, port competition, and economic corridors linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. It includes comparative trade intensity data and institutional drivers of economic integration.

Comparative Studies

22. Comparison with Other Regional Blocs

This chapter compares GCC integration with the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It highlights differences in supranational authority, regulatory depth, internal trade share, and political integration models.

23. Informal Politics in the Persian Gulf

This chapter explores majlis diplomacy, elite networks, merchant families, religious institutions, sovereign wealth fund influence, and quiet back-channel negotiations. It assesses how informal governance complements or bypasses formal institutions.

24. Informal Policy-Making and Pluralism

This section analyzes how informal consultations, business councils, technocratic networks, and cross-border social ties can incrementally promote greater policy pluralism without destabilizing political systems.

GCC+1

25. The Informal Foreign Policy Dialogue

This chapter examines track-two diplomacy, quiet mediation by Oman, private sector dialogue platforms, and security confidence-building measures between Gulf states and Iran.

26. GCC+1 Framework

This section conceptualizes GCC+1 as structured engagement between the GCC and key external actors such as Iran, the European Union, India, or China. It explores flexible multi-actor formats to manage security, trade, and environmental cooperation.

27. Environmental Security Issues in the Persian Gulf

This chapter addresses water scarcity, desalination dependence, marine ecosystem degradation, extreme heat, and climate vulnerability. It examines shared environmental risks and collective governance gaps.

28. Stakeholder Voices in the Persian Gulf

This section incorporates perspectives from policymakers, business leaders, civil society actors, youth representatives, and environmental experts. It highlights diversity within Gulf societies.

Keeping the Peace

29. Case Studies

We examine two case-studies. This first analyzes sub-national economic diversification, industrial development, port strategy, and integration into regional trade networks from the perspective of Khuzistan. The second case explores borderland governance, water management tensions, industrial underdevelopment, and cross-border economic potential within Gulf states, UAE and Oman. The third case concerns the Saudi Jazan province, and the fourth the border region Dhofar between Oman and Yemen. We examine how to mutualise in anticipation of return commission in the EU.

30. Trade Trends

Trade in the Persian Gulf shows both potential and constraints. Intra-GCC trade accounts for around 8–10 percent of total trade, growing slowly through industrial goods, construction materials, and food, while energy and petrochemicals remain globally oriented. Trade with Iran is intermittent but expanding in key sectors like industry, agriculture, and construction, shaped by sanctions and political dynamics.

31. Regions Compared

Compared with regions like the EU or ASEAN, Gulf trade is less integrated, reflecting limited supranational institutions and formal mechanisms. We examine why and puts forward proposals for strengthening governance.

32.Institutionalized policymaking

Through the GCC Secretariat and sectoral committees guides regulation, but informal networks, and business alliances continue to influence outcomes in the Persian Gulf. This context adds complexity, requiring coordination across national, regional, and sectoral levels. Formal and informal mechanisms coexist to manage uncertainty, share knowledge, and align strategic priorities. Overall, Gulf trade is shaped by a dynamic mix of regional cooperation, informal influence, and multilevel governance.

33. Informal policy-making

Informal policy making in the Persian Gulf is evolving from reliance on personal networks, and elite patronage toward more structured, sectoral, and multilevel coordination. While traditional ties between ruling families, business elites, and military or religious actors remain influential, increasing economic complexity and regional integration are creating new spaces for consultation and knowledge exchange. This evolution allows states to navigate uncertainty, manage disputes, and align strategic priorities without relying solely on formal institutions. Over time, these hybrid mechanisms are shaping a more flexible and adaptive approach to governance and regional cooperation.

Multi-level Policy-making ?

34.Multilevel policymaking in the GCC+1

The section links local, national, regional, and international governance levels. It evaluates how SDG implementation can operate across ministries, GCC bodies, and external partnerships. It emphasizes regulatory harmonization and cross-border sustainability metrics. We also assesses demographic trends, education-labor mismatches, private sector absorption limits, and entrepre-neurship policy. There is the role of GCC regulations in ensuring implementation of international obligations.

Peace and War

35. Post-Conflict Scenarios

This section puts forward the various post-conflict scenarios in the event the massive build up of US military force in the Middle East should lead to surgical strikes due to unresolvable issues at the bargaining table, regime change or obliteration of the Iranian state.

36.Iran's Post-Sanction Economy and IRGC

Following decolonisation, the Muslim world reverted to Palace-Army-Ulema to rebuild their societies. Since then the processes of strengthening governance and making policy making more pluralist have been ongoing. Few countries have been subjected to sanctions like Iran, a country having genuine concerns for the Middle East as a region and a long standing touch for in justice and grievance at Islam being surpassed by the West as the globally leading civilization. When legitimate representatives of the people have returned to power, a long list of reforms awaits the new government will have to address in a very concrete and substantial manner several issues moving up the political agenda such as relationship between ruler-ruled, center-periphery, civilian-military, military-to-military dialogue, public administration reform, minorities and economic reform. The dilemma is they don't know how to. Given the prospect of civil war this could lead to the US-EU coordinating the resumption of diplomatic relations with Teheran in return for DDR PMF Iraq and discrete diplomatic dialogue.

In this section, we are addressing concerns about the burgeoning economic empire of the IRGC in this section to better understand the issues to address to underpin political reform and what sanctions does to an economy by building up to conflict and leave bitter sentiments.

Renvoi

The ethical principles and shared heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam form a foundation for dialogue, the nuances of which are explored in greater detail in the renvoi section, where the specific areas of common ground, conflict, and strategic dialogue are outlined. This provides for a comprehensive examination of how these faith traditions intersect and diverge, where common ground, points of tension, and methods for constructive dialogue are analyzed. This capping section serves as well as an entry point; the detailed exploration of shared values and contested areas within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is reserved peace-building – not War.

The conclusions integrates findings, evaluates feasibility of gradual institutional deepening, and proposes policy recommendations for strengthening interdependence, pluralism, and sustainable regional governance in the Persian Gulf, even as it examines possibilities for further research, counterarguments and likely scenarios in the unlikely event of plus ca change.

2.0 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PERSIAN GULF

The Persian Gulf has long held a central place in global history, serving as a nexus for trade, cultural exchange, and geopolitical strategy. Its strategic location between the Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian Plateau has rendered it a locus of human settlement, commerce, and conflict for millennia. Understanding the historical trajectory of this region requires an examination that spans antiquity, the rise of Islam, European colonial intrusion, the discovery of oil, and the contemporary geopolitical environment shaped by global powers.

Ancient and Pre-Islamic History

The Persian Gulf region has been inhabited since at least the 3rd millennium BCE, serving as a hub for early civilizations. Mesopotamian city-states, particularly Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon, relied on the Gulf as a trade route to the Indus Valley and other South Asian regions. Archaeological evidence from sites such as Dilmun (modern Bahrain) and Failaka Island (Kuwait) reveals a complex network of maritime trade linking Mesopotamia with the civilizations of the Indus River and the Oman coast. These early interactions facilitated not only the exchange of goods, including copper, pearls, and textiles, but also the transmission of cultural, religious, and technological innovations.

During the Achaemenid period (c. 550–330 BCE), the Persian Gulf became a central component of the empire's maritime strategy. The Achaemenids established naval bases and ports along the coast, particularly in what is now southern Iran, enabling the movement of troops, tribute, and trade goods. Herodotus and later classical sources reference Persian naval expeditions into the Gulf, highlighting its strategic significance in projecting imperial power and maintaining control over regional trade routes.

Hellenistic and subsequent Parthian and Sassanian periods further entrenched the Gulf's role as a commercial corridor. Greek historians, including Strabo, noted the bustling ports and the exchange of exotic commodities such as pearls, spices, and incense. Under the Sassanians (224–651 CE), the Gulf not only facilitated trade but also functioned as a frontier zone against external powers, particularly the Roman and later Byzantine empires. The development of fortified ports and urban centers such as Siraf exemplifies the Gulf's economic and strategic centrality in pre-Islamic times.

Islamic Expansion and Medieval Dynamics

The advent of Islam in the 7th century CE transformed the socio-political landscape of the Persian Gulf. The Rashidun Caliphate quickly extended its control over the Gulf littoral, integrating Arab tribes and established Persian communities into a new religious and administrative framework. The Gulf became a critical artery for trade linking the Islamic heartlands in the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, and Iran with the Indian Ocean network.

Maritime commerce flourished under Islamic rule, facilitating the exchange of textiles, metals, pearls, and spices.

During the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), the Persian Gulf remained an important commercial and strategic zone. The city of Basra emerged as a vital port, linking the Arabian hinterland to the broader Indian Ocean trade system. The Gulf also became a contested space among local dynasties, such as the Qarmatians, who challenged Abbasid authority in eastern Arabia during the 9th and 10th centuries. Their control over the Gulf ports demonstrated the region's vulnerability to fragmentation and the complex interplay between local autonomy and imperial oversight.

By the medieval period, the Persian Gulf was increasingly incorporated into the maritime routes connecting East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Arab and Persian merchants dominated the commerce in pearls, dates, and luxury goods, while the arrival of Indian and later Chinese merchants underscored the Gulf's integration into a wider Eurasian economic system. Notably, the Gulf also functioned as a conduit for the spread of ideas, religious movements, and technological innovations, including navigation techniques and shipbuilding expertise that would later underpin European colonial ambitions.

European Intrusion and Colonial Contestation

The 16th century marked the onset of European involvement in the Persian Gulf, with the Portuguese pioneering maritime expeditions that sought to control key trade routes and ports. The capture of Hormuz in 1507 exemplified the strategic importance of the Gulf as a chokepoint for commerce entering and exiting the Indian Ocean. Portuguese control, however, was challenged by local powers and the emergent Safavid Empire, which sought to assert authority over southern Persia and the Gulf littoral.

The decline of Portuguese influence opened the door for the British East India Company in the 17th and 18th centuries. Britain established a strategic presence in the Gulf to safeguard maritime trade, particularly the passage to India, the empire's most valuable colony. Treaties with local sheikhdoms along the Trucial Coast, as well as naval dominance over key ports, allowed Britain to exert influence without formal annexation. The Gulf became a semi-protectorate, ensuring the security of British interests and suppressing piracy while simultaneously maintaining local political structures.

The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed intensified colonial competition between Britain, France, and other European powers. The discovery of oil, first in Iran in 1908, added a new dimension to the Gulf's strategic value. British control over oil concessions and the establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later BP) cemented the Gulf's centrality in global energy supply chains. This period also witnessed increasing tension between local tribal authorities, emerging state entities, and European colonial powers, laying the groundwork for later political conflicts.

Oil, Nationalism, and the Emergence of Modern States

The interwar period and the mid-20th century marked a transformative era for the Persian Gulf. The discovery of vast hydrocarbon reserves in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the

United Arab Emirates reshaped the region's economic and political landscape. Oil wealth provided the financial foundation for modern state-building, while also drawing the attention of global powers, particularly the United States and Britain, in the context of energy security.

Nationalist movements emerged alongside oil development, challenging colonial frameworks and seeking greater sovereignty over natural resources. In Iran, the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951 under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh provoked a crisis that culminated in the 1953 CIA- and MI6-backed coup, underscoring the Gulf's centrality in Cold War geopolitics. Similarly, the British withdrawal from "east of Suez" in the late 1960s prompted accelerated state consolidation in the Gulf sheikhdoms and the formation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971.

The Gulf's oil wealth also incentivized significant infrastructural and urban development. Ports, airports, and modern cities such as Dubai, Doha, and Manama emerged as hubs of commerce, finance, and regional governance. Yet the distribution of wealth and the dependence on oil exports created socio-economic vulnerabilities and fostered competition among Gulf states, as well as between Gulf states and external powers seeking to influence regional security dynamics.

Geopolitical Rivalries and the Gulf Wars

The Arabian Peninsula is strategically located at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe.

It controls vital maritime routes, including the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Its position links the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean, key for global trade.

The region holds some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves.Countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait influence OPEC and global energy markets. It is home to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), coordinating regional security and diplomacy. Proximity to Iran, Iraq, and Yemen makes it central to Middle Eastern geopolitics. Western powers maintain military presence to secure shipping lanes and energy supplies. The region's cultural and religious significance is amplified by Mecca and Medina. Overall, the Arabian Peninsula is a critical hub for energy, security, and regional influence.

Iran occupies a strategically central position bridging the Caspian Sea in the north, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf in the south. Its northern border along the Caspian connects it to energy-rich regions and provides access to maritime trade routes. To the northeast, Iran borders Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, linking it to Central Asian markets, resources, and geopolitical dynamics. In the south, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz give Iran control over one of the world's most critical oil chokepoints, influencing global energy security. This position allows Iran to act as a land bridge between the Middle East and Central Asia, giving it strategic leverage in regional trade, politics, and military affairs. Its location also places it at the heart of key regional conflicts and alliances, shaping relationships with neighbors and global powers alike. Iran's geography enhances both economic opportunities and security challenges, making it a pivotal player in Eurasian geopolitics.

Iraq is strategically located in the heart of the Middle East, bordering Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, Syria and Jordan to the west, and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south. Its position bridges the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean, making it a potential transit corridor for trade and energy. Iraq sits on some of the world's largest oil reserves, giving it major economic and strategic significance. Its borders connect it to key regional powers, which makes it a focal point in Middle Eastern politics and security dynamics. Iraq's geography has historically made it vulnerable to external interventions and conflicts, but also central to regional cooperation and energy networks. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers enhance its agricultural and economic value, further emphasizing its regional importance. Its proximity to both the Gulf states and Central Asia gives Iraq a bridge role between different geopolitical zones. Iraq's location makes it critical for energy transport, regional security, and trade routes.

The late 20th century witnessed the Gulf becoming a theater for regional and global conflict. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) highlighted the intersection of ideological, territorial, and sectarian disputes in the Gulf, with direct implications for global energy security due to attacks on oil infrastructure and shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz. The United States and other global powers became increasingly involved, providing military and logistical support to various actors, establishing a permanent strategic presence in the region.

The 1990–1991 Gulf War, triggered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, further underscored the strategic significance of the Gulf to global politics. The conflict highlighted the vulnerability of small states, the dependence of industrialized economies on Gulf oil, and the role of international institutions such as the United Nations in coordinating military and economic responses. The post-war period saw the continued militarization of the Gulf, the establishment of long-term US bases in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and renewed attention to regional alliances and rivalries, particularly between Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Contemporary Strategic Importance

In the 21st century, the Persian Gulf remains a focal point of global geopolitical, economic, and security considerations. The region's hydrocarbon resources continue to underpin the global energy market, while emerging challenges such as maritime security threats, transnational terrorism, and environmental stressors demand sophisticated regional and international cooperation. The Gulf's strategic chokepoints, notably the Strait of Hormuz, retain global significance, given the volume of oil and liquefied natural gas transiting through them.

The Persian Gulf region is by far the most important global hub for fossil fuels, containing a disproportionate share of the world's proven energy reserves despite its relatively small geographic size. Collectively, the Gulf states—which include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—control roughly half of the world's proven oil reserves. Saudi Arabia alone accounts for approximately 17 to 18 percent of global oil reserves, making it the single largest oil-holding country in the world. Iran and Iraq each hold significant portions as well, with Iraq's reserves concentrated in the south and east, and Iran's largely in the southwest and offshore fields in the Persian Gulf. Kuwait and the UAE, though smaller, also hold substantial quantities, with the UAE's reserves largely concentrated in Abu Dhabi. These

reserves are not just abundant; they are often of high quality, particularly in terms of light and medium crude, which makes them highly sought after for global refining.

In addition to oil, the Persian Gulf region is a dominant center of natural gas reserves. The Gulf states together account for approximately 40 to 45 percent of the world's proven natural gas reserves. Qatar and Iran are the leaders in gas reserves, with Qatar's North Field and Iran's South Pars field forming a contiguous super-giant deposit, considered the largest single natural gas field in the world. These fields underpin not only domestic energy consumption but also the region's dominance in liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, particularly from Qatar, which is one of the world's top LNG exporters. Iran, while limited by sanctions in its export potential, holds enormous untapped reserves that could dramatically increase global gas supply if fully developed.

The Persian Gulf region also contributes a substantial share of global production. Gulf states collectively produce around 30 to 35 percent of the world's daily oil output, which directly affects global energy prices and market stability. Saudi Arabia's production alone regularly ranges between 9 and 10 million barrels per day, giving it significant influence in OPEC and international markets. Gas production is also strategically important, with Qatar dominating global LNG exports and Iran's reserves representing one of the largest potential supplies in the world.

Beyond the raw numbers, the significance of these reserves is amplified by the region's geopolitical and economic importance. Most of the Gulf's oil and gas is exported through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow chokepoint that sees roughly 20 percent of global petroleum pass through daily. Any disruption—whether due to political tensions, military incidents, or technical challenges—can have an outsized impact on global energy security. In addition, Gulf energy reserves are central to the economic models of these states, funding national development, modernization projects, and social programs, while also serving as a source of geopolitical leverage.

In short, while the Persian Gulf occupies only a fraction of the Earth's surface, it contains nearly half of the world's oil and more than 40 percent of its natural gas. The concentration, quality, and export capacity of these reserves make the region the single most critical energy hub on the planet. This dominance explains why the Persian Gulf has long been the focus of international diplomacy, strategic competition, and global economic interest, and why shifts in Gulf production or policy reverberate across the world's energy markets.

Modern geopolitical rivalries involve both regional actors—primarily Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other GCC members—and extraregional powers, including the United States, China, and Russia. Iran's nuclear ambitions, Saudi-Iranian competition, and the alignment of Gulf states with global powers create a complex security environment. In addition, economic diversification efforts, particularly the Gulf states' "Vision" strategies, reflect the desire to reduce dependence on hydrocarbons and assert regional influence in finance, technology, and infrastructure development.

Furthermore, the Persian Gulf plays a critical role in international law and maritime governance. Disputes over territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and the ownership of

islands and maritime boundaries necessitate diplomatic negotiation and, at times, international adjudication. Multilateral frameworks, such as the GCC, the United Nations, and the International Maritime Organization, are central to managing these tensions and ensuring the stability of global trade networks.

Iran's Perception of the Persian Gulf

Iran is a geographically diverse country bridging Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, which shapes its internal logistics, strategic posture, and cultural identity. In the north, along the Caspian coast and the Alborz Mountains, fertile plains and forested slopes provide access to the Caspian Sea and historically have been important for trade routes toward Russia and Central Asia. Western Iran, dominated by the Zagros Mountains and Kurdish regions, features rugged terrain and historically semi-autonomous tribal areas, forming corridors toward Iraq and Anatolia. Central Iran consists of the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut deserts, an arid interior plateau that hosts key road networks despite sparse settlements.

Eastern Iran, along the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, is semi-arid and sparsely populated, serving as a corridor for trade and migration, and strategically important for energy exports. Southern Iran along the Persian Gulf is a strategic energy corridor with major oil fields such as Khuzestan, Bushehr, and South Pars, as well as ports including Bandar Abbas and Khorramshahr that enable maritime trade, pipelines, and regional influence.

Iran's strategic routes include north–south corridors from the Caspian ports to the Persian Gulf, essential for trade and military logistics, and east–west corridors linking Central and northern roads toward Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, historically used by Silk Road caravans.

Oil and gas pipelines from South Pars/North Dome feed domestic consumption and exports to Turkey, Oman, UAE, and China, while potential Persian Gulf exports leverage maritime access to global markets.

The Persian Gulf serves as Iran's southern maritime lifeline, acting as both a gateway and a chokepoint that is vital for energy trade, regional influence, and deterrence. Islands in the Gulf, including Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, are symbols of sovereignty and strategic leverage in regional security politics. Arab Gulf states generally perceive Iran through a combination of economic, sectarian, and strategic lenses. Security concerns are paramount, as Iran's proximity and naval presence are viewed cautiously, while it is also seen as an economic competitor in shared energy markets. Sectarian contrasts, with Shia-majority Iran versus Sunni-majority Gulf states, amplify strategic distrust, yet Arab states recognize Iran's historical continuity and cultural influence, leading to pragmatic engagement in trade and regional coordination on energy and security at times.

Iran's modern sense of cohesion and leadership in the Gulf is not solely an oil-era phenomenon, but oil dramatically accelerated and formalized it. Historically, Persian empires established a civilizational and regional leadership narrative linking Iran to Mesopotamia, the Gulf, and Central Asia. In the 20th century, discoveries of oil in Khuzestan and other fields underpinned economic sovereignty and regional leverage, enabling modern military expansion, infrastructure, and foreign policy influence. Oil wealth positioned Iran as a natural leader in regional energy politics, controlling export routes, pipelines, and ports.

This era reinforced domestic centralization, allowing Iran to craft a narrative of regional guardianship and independence, while energy diplomacy served as a tool for both deterrence and negotiation. Iran's leadership and cohesion in the Gulf therefore emerge from a fusion of historical Persian identity, geostrategic location, and energy resource control; the oil era intensified but did not solely create this sense of agency.

Arab Gulf states perceive Iran and its presence on the Persian Gulf through a complex combination of strategic, economic, and sectarian lenses, with Iran's geographical proximity serving as a defining factor in their calculations. Security concerns dominate their view, as Iran lies along the northern shore of the Gulf, controlling access to major shipping lanes, chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, and ports including Bandar Abbas and Khorramshahr, which are crucial for regional and global energy flows. This adjacency allows Iran to project influence over maritime routes and monitor or potentially disrupt Gulf trade, giving its naval and strategic deployments disproportionate significance relative to its size. At the same time, Iran is seen as a competitor in energy markets, controlling key export corridors and pipelines, including the South Pars/North Dome gas field infrastructure, which connects southern Iran to domestic and international buyers. The sectarian contrast, with Shia-majority Iran versus Sunni-majority Gulf states, amplifies strategic distrust, while Iran's physical proximity and control of geographic corridors intensify the perception of immediacy and potential coercion. Nevertheless, Arab states also recognize Iran's historical continuity, population size, and enduring regional influence, which produces a nuanced posture of rivalry alongside pragmatic engagement in trade, energy coordination, and selective security dialogue. Arab perceptions of the Persian Gulf thus reflect both anxiety over Iran's ability to project power along maritime and overland corridors, and acknowledgment of the necessity to manage and coexist with a geographically proximate, historically entrenched regional actor.

Iran's modern sense of cohesion and leadership in the Gulf is not solely an oil-era phenomenon, but the discovery and exploitation of oil dramatically accelerated and formalized its regional role. Historically, Persian empires established a civilizational and regional leadership narrative that linked Iran to Mesopotamia, the Gulf, and Central Asia, emphasizing control of trade routes, river corridors, and overland pathways that connected the interior plateau to coastal regions. In the 20th century, discoveries of oil in Khuzestan and other fields underpinned economic sovereignty and regional leverage, enabling modern military expansion, infrastructure development, and a foreign policy capable of influencing both Gulf neighbors and broader energy markets. Oil wealth positioned Iran as a natural leader in regional energy politics, controlling export routes, pipelines, and strategic ports that connect domestic production to global markets. This era reinforced domestic centralization, allowing Iran to craft a narrative of regional guardianship and independence, while energy diplomacy became a tool for deterrence and negotiation.

Iran's leadership and cohesion in the Gulf therefore emerge from a fusion of historical Persian identity, geostrategic location, and control of energy resources and critical corridors; the oil era intensified but did not solely create this sense of agency. Arab Gulf states perceive this combination as both a strategic challenge and a constant factor in regional planning, with Iran's geographical proximity, control over maritime and pipeline routes, and historical influence shaping their security calculations, energy strategies, and diplomatic posture throughout the Persian Gulf.

DYNAMICS OF THE PERSIAN GULF

The dynamics of the Persian Gulf cannot be understood in isolation from the broader redistribution of global power. The region sits at the intersection of energy flows, maritime chokepoints, and great-power rivalry, and it is increasingly shaped by the shift from a largely US-centered order toward a more multipolar system in which China, India, Russia, and middle powers exercise greater influence. These systemic shifts both constrain and open new prospects for regional cooperation.

For decades, the Gulf's security architecture rested heavily on the role of the United States as external guarantor. That role has not disappeared, but it has become more selective and burden-sharing oriented. Perceived US retrenchment after Iraq and Afghanistan, alongside Washington's strategic pivot to Asia, encouraged Gulf states to diversify partnerships. The rise of China as the largest energy customer for several Gulf producers and as a key trade and infrastructure partner under the Belt and Road framework has deepened economic interdependence. Meanwhile, Russia has strengthened coordination with Gulf producers through OPEC+ energy diplomacy, reinforcing a more plural external environment.

This diffusion of power has generated hedging strategies across the region. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia pursue diversified alignments, balancing security ties with Washington, energy coordination with Moscow, and economic integration with Beijing. Oman continues its traditional mediation posture, while Bahrain remains closely anchored to Gulf and Western security frameworks. Iraq attempts a delicate balancing act between Arab neighbors, Iran, and the United States, reflecting its internal fragmentation and reconstruction needs. Iran, constrained by sanctions and geopolitical rivalry, projects influence through asymmetric and networked means across the Levant and Iraq, shaping the security calculus of the Gulf monarchies.

The interaction between global power shifts and regional rivalries has produced both destabilizing and stabilizing effects. On the destabilizing side, proxy conflicts, maritime incidents, and sanctions regimes increase uncertainty and fragment collective action. Energy markets become politicized, and infrastructure projects risk being drawn into strategic competition. On the stabilizing side, multipolarity reduces binary alignments and creates incentives for pragmatic engagement. The Chinese-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran illustrates how external actors can facilitate regional de-escalation when interests converge.

Energy transition is another transformative variable. As global decarbonization accelerates, Gulf hydrocarbon exporters face long-term demand uncertainty. This structural shift pushes

leading producers toward diversification, green hydrogen, renewables, logistics, and advanced manufacturing. Shared exposure to climate risks, water scarcity, and extreme heat creates a functional basis for cooperation that transcends political divides. Environmental governance, desalination standards, grid interconnection, and carbon market coordination could become less politicized entry points for dialogue.

Maritime security in and around the Strait of Hormuz remains a critical axis. The Gulf is a corridor linking Europe and Asia, and disruptions have global ripple effects. As Asian energy dependence deepens, Asian powers have stronger incentives to support stability. This widens the set of stakeholders in Gulf security beyond traditional Western alliances and may gradually reshape burden-sharing arrangements. A more plural maritime governance model, involving regional states alongside major trading partners, could emerge over time.

The prospects for cooperation thus depend on how regional actors manage three interacting layers. The first is intra-Gulf rivalry, particularly between Iran and key members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The second is the design of regional institutions capable of translating de-escalation into sustained policy coordination. The third is the ability of Gulf states to leverage global multipolarity without becoming arenas for great-power confrontation.

Cooperation is most feasible in areas where interests converge structurally rather than ideologically. Energy market stabilization through coordinated production policies, climate adaptation and water security, digital infrastructure standards, and public health resilience offer pragmatic pathways. Economic diversification strategies also create space for joint ventures in logistics corridors, tourism circuits, financial services, and sovereign wealth co-investment platforms. These domains are less zero-sum and more compatible with hedging strategies.

However, structural obstacles remain. Sanctions on Iran complicate inclusive regional frameworks. Domestic reform agendas, especially in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, demand policy focus and resources that may reduce appetite for institutional experimentation. Iraq's internal governance fragility limits its ability to anchor multilateral initiatives. Trust deficits, accumulated through decades of rivalry, cannot be erased quickly.

From a systemic perspective, multipolarity both fragments and incentivizes cooperation. It fragments because external patrons are more diverse and competition among them can spill into the region. It incentivizes cooperation because no single external actor can or will impose order unilaterally. Regional states therefore have stronger incentives to create their own stabilizing mechanisms, whether formal or informal.

In strategic terms, the Persian Gulf is moving from a security-dominated order to a hybrid order where economics, energy transition, climate governance, and connectivity increasingly intersect with security concerns. If regional actors succeed in reframing shared vulnerabilities—water scarcity, energy transition risks, supply chain exposure—as common goods problems rather than arenas of rivalry, the prospects for cooperation improve significantly. If, however, global power competition intensifies into bloc confrontation, the Gulf may again become a frontline theater rather than a laboratory of managed multipolarity.

The direction of travel will depend less on external powers than on the capacity of Gulf states to institutionalize dialogue, insulate functional cooperation from geopolitical shocks, and align

domestic transformation agendas with regional public goods. In a multipolar world, cooperation in the Persian Gulf is no longer a derivative of superpower design; it is increasingly a product of regional strategic choice.

Summary

The Persian Gulf's history is a testament to its enduring significance in human civilization. From ancient trade networks and imperial conquests to colonial domination, oil wealth, and modern geopolitical rivalries, the Gulf has consistently functioned as a pivotal space linking East and West, North and South. Its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and complex socio-political dynamics have made it both a source of opportunity and a locus of conflict. Understanding the historical context of the Persian Gulf is essential for comprehending contemporary regional developments and the interplay between local, regional, and global actors in shaping its future trajectory.

3. Conflicts in the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is characterized by a complex spectrum of conflicts that operate simultaneously at interstate, societal, and human levels. Among these, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the most consequential, shaping the strategic orientation of the entire region. This rivalry manifests through ideological competition, sectarian narratives, and proxy conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. It also drives military buildups, arms acquisitions, and alignment with extra-regional powers. The Iran-Saudi competition influences Gulf state policies, the structure of alliances, and the perception of threat among smaller states. Another source of interstate tension is the internal fragmentation of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The 2017–2021 Qatar blockade revealed the fragility of regional cohesion and the potential for intra-GCC disputes to disrupt collective security arrangements. These disputes are compounded by differing economic priorities and geopolitical alignments among member states. The presence of external powers, particularly the United States, China, and Russia, further complicates Gulf security dynamics. Foreign military presence functions as both a stabilizing and destabilizing factor, depending on the alignment of interests with regional actors. Strategic choke points, such as the Strait of Hormuz, amplify the stakes of interstate tensions because they are critical to global energy supply and maritime trade.

Conflicts at the societal level include sectarian polarization, which has significant implications for domestic legitimacy. Sunni-Shia divisions are particularly pronounced in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Iraq, and Kuwait. Sectarian mobilization often interacts with political exclusion, economic marginalization, and social grievances. Demographic imbalance and labor stratification represent another societal-level tension.

Expatriates dominate the population in cities such as Dubai and Doha, creating segmented labor markets and social hierarchies. The dependence of Gulf economies on migrant labor generates structural inequalities and potential social instability. Youth unemployment and pressures associated with economic transition constitute additional societal challenges. Rentier-state economies have historically relied on welfare distribution and subsidies, but post-oil fiscal pressures undermine these arrangements.

The sustainability of governance structures increasingly depends on the capacity to generate employment and provide meaningful economic participation. Human-level conflicts are often immediate in impact and morally pressing. Labor exploitation remains prevalent, particularly under sponsorship systems, limiting the autonomy and rights of migrant workers. Legal frameworks regulating labor relations have improved in some contexts, but enforcement remains inconsistent. Civil liberties and political participation limitations also contribute to human-level tensions. Political expression, assembly, and representation are constrained across much of the Gulf, generating latent grievances. The interconnection between state, societal, and human-level conflicts means that instability in one domain can exacerbate tensions in others. Interstate rivalries shape the security environment and influence domestic policy choices, while societal fractures affect governance legitimacy. Human rights violations, particularly in labor and political domains, undermine long-term social cohesion.

The prioritization of conflict resolution requires attention to structural and immediate risks. De-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is essential due to its systemic impact on regional security. Institutionalized dialogue, confidence-building measures, and transparency initiatives are critical to reducing the likelihood of escalation. Establishing a multilateral security framework for the Strait of Hormuz is a key mechanism to protect global energy flows.

Strengthening the Gulf Cooperation Council can mitigate alliance fragility and improve crisis management capabilities. Labor and citizenship reforms are necessary to address structural societal grievances before they manifest in unrest.

Gradual political inclusion and judicial reforms enhance governance legitimacy and allow for the peaceful expression of social and political interests. Economic diversification and human capital investment are vital to reduce dependence on oil rents and subsidized employment.

Addressing youth unemployment strengthens regime stability and fosters social resilience. Legal protections for migrant labor, including wage enforcement and mobility rights, are critical to reducing human-level exploitation. The abolition or reform of sponsorship systems is a key step toward equitable labor relations. Overall, the Persian Gulf must be understood as a region in which multiple layers of conflict intersect and reinforce one another. Interstate rivalries create the overarching strategic framework within which societal and human-level conflicts occur.

Societal inequalities, demographic pressures, and labor stratification generate domestic vulnerabilities. Human-level grievances, particularly in labor rights and political participation, exert immediate moral and practical pressures on governance. Strategic sequencing of conflict resolution is therefore essential, with interstate de-escalation preceding societal and human-level reforms. Institutional mechanisms that integrate economic, political, and security cooperation are more likely to produce durable stability.

Confidence-building measures, transparency in military operations, and inclusive governance frameworks are mutually reinforcing solutions. Addressing structural inequalities in labor, citizenship, and youth employment reduces the risk of social unrest. Political reforms that allow controlled participation increase state legitimacy without compromising regime stability. Finally, a holistic approach to the Persian Gulf recognizes the interdependence of interstate,

societal, and human-level challenges and the necessity of multi-tiered, analytically informed policy interventions.

Figure State, Fear & People – Hikm+Ilm=
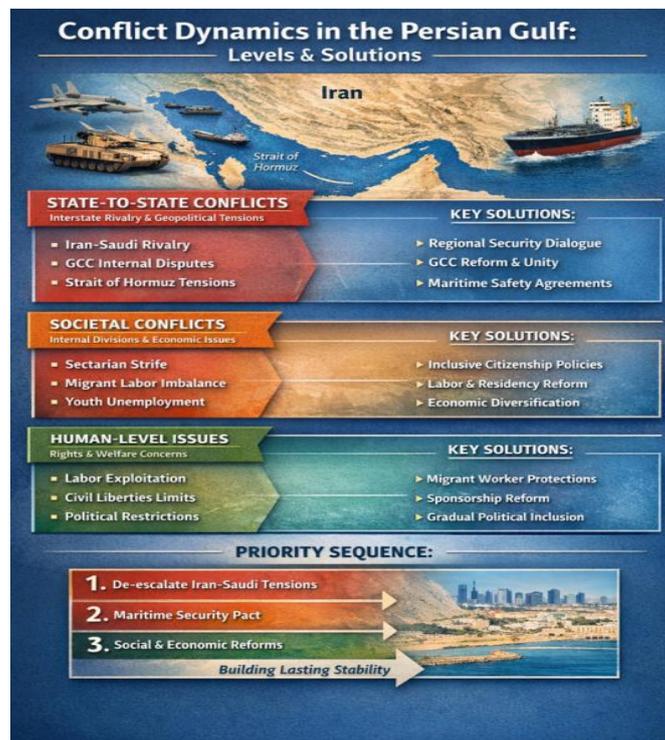
The infographic presents a structured analysis of conflicts in the Persian Gulf by dividing them into three interconnected levels: state-to-state, societal, and human. At the top level, interstate conflicts such as the Iran-Saudi rivalry, GCC fragmentation, and tensions over the Strait of Hormuz define the region's strategic environment and set the framework for all other tensions.

Societal-level conflicts, including sectarian polarization, migrant labor imbalances, and youth unemployment, arise within states and are shaped by these broader geopolitical pressures. Human-level issues, such as labor exploitation, restricted civil liberties, and limited political participation, have immediate moral and social impacts and are exacerbated by both state and societal tensions. Each conflict level is paired with corresponding solution pathways, ranging from regional dialogue and maritime security agreements to labor reforms and gradual political inclusion.

The infographic emphasizes the interconnection between these layers, illustrating how instability at one level can amplify problems at another. Priority sequencing is highlighted, suggesting that interstate de-escalation should precede societal and human-level reforms to ensure systemic stability. Economic diversification and social reforms are positioned as essential for mitigating structural inequalities and sustaining long-term governance legitimacy. The visual hierarchy reinforces the analytical logic, showing that addressing strategic, economic, and human concerns in sequence builds resilience. Overall, the infographic conveys

a coherent, multi-tiered strategy for understanding and managing the Persian Gulf's complex conflict dynamics.

STATE-TO-STATE CONFLICTS

4.KSA-Iran Rivalry

The scholarly literature on the Saudi–Iran rivalry emphasizes the multi-dimensional and long-standing nature of competition between the two states. Analysts identify the rivalry as rooted in both ideological and geopolitical differences, particularly following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Saudi Arabia's identity as a Sunni, monarchic state contrasts with Iran's revolutionary Shia theocratic ideology, creating a persistent narrative of sectarian opposition. However, scholars caution against overly simplistic sectarian explanations, highlighting security dilemmas, strategic calculations, and domestic pressures as major drivers. The rivalry manifests through proxy conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, where each state supports aligned militias or political actors to extend influence. Historical events, including the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf Wars, further reinforced mutual suspicion and competitive regional strategies. Economic factors also contribute, as both states leverage energy markets, oil diplomacy, and financial resources to consolidate regional influence.

Kim Ghattas, in Black Wave, emphasizes how the rivalry has shaped political identities, media narratives, and public perceptions in both countries. Simon Mabon critiques the tendency of some literature to frame the competition solely in sectarian terms, arguing that it is primarily a struggle over regional primacy. Scholars note that external powers, including the United States, Russia, and China, have historically magnified the rivalry by aligning with one or both actors. The presence of these external actors has introduced additional layers of complexity, often constraining the autonomy of regional diplomacy. Andrew Scott Cooper, in The Oil Kings, situates the rivalry within broader energy geopolitics, showing how oil-dependent economies have used resource control to bolster diplomatic leverage. Ehteshami emphasizes that Gulf politics must be analyzed as a system where bilateral tensions are embedded in larger Arab-Iranian dynamics. Articles focusing on the Yemen conflict demonstrate how proxy wars act as both a battlefield and a bargaining chip for broader regional negotiation. Scholars argue that the rivalry is cyclical, with periods of limited cooperation often followed by escalations due to mistrust and security concerns. Ibrahim Fraihat, in his strategic analysis, highlights the importance of dialogue and confidence-building measures to mitigate misperceptions. Research underscores the role of identity politics and media framing in sustaining domestic support for confrontational policies. Academic works also draw attention to the economic vulnerabilities created by prolonged competition, including the cost of military interventions and disrupted trade. Several authors argue that internal political legitimacy concerns drive external assertiveness, as regimes seek to distract from domestic challenges. The literature consistently stresses the importance of multilateral engagement, noting that bilateral agreements alone have often been fragile.

Analysts note that Saudi–Iran rivalry is a core component of broader Middle Eastern geopolitical instability, influencing the policies of smaller states and non-state actors. Scholars also highlight the need to contextualize the rivalry within regional institutional weaknesses, such as the limitations of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The literature demonstrates that

misperceptions, lack of trust, and fear of encirclement are recurring obstacles to sustained diplomacy. There is general agreement that energy interdependence, trade networks, and shared security interests could provide avenues for confidence-building. Scholars emphasize that historical grievances and ideological framing require sustained diplomatic efforts to de-escalate. Research shows that previous ceasefires and limited agreements often failed due to the absence of enforceable monitoring mechanisms. Academic analysis suggests that engagement strategies must combine security, economic, and political dimensions simultaneously. Ehteshami's work points to the value of integrating regional perspectives into superpower diplomacy to avoid the projection of external rivalries onto local conflicts. Some literature recommends multilateral forums that include Gulf states and Iran, potentially mediated by neutral powers, to address maritime security, counter-terrorism, and trade stability.

Clash of strategies between KSA and Iran

Militarily, Iran predicate its strategy on no defeat, no conquest and reserve the right to escalate through an elaborate network of mostly Shia clients in the interest of regional domination through long-term campaigns now in Islamic garments, i.e. it seeks neither territorial expansion nor direct conventional domination. The costly Iran–Iraq War reinforced the primacy of regime survival and strategic endurance. Recognizing its limitations in conventional warfare, Tehran emphasizes asymmetric capabilities over large-scale offensive operations. A central pillar of this approach is an elaborate network of allied militias, proxy forces, and partner movements across the region. Through this network, Iran reserves the right to escalate conflicts indirectly, raising the costs for adversaries without inviting full-scale war. These actors function as strategic depth and force multipliers, extending Iranian influence beyond its borders. Coordination and support for this architecture are largely overseen by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, particularly its external operations branch. Escalation, therefore, becomes calibrated and deniable rather than overt and conventional.

In contrast, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia anchors its security posture in formal defense partnerships. As a longstanding ally of the United States, Saudi Arabia relies on structured military cooperation, advanced arms procurement, and alliance-based deterrence to secure its regional position. episodic tension.

Iran's doctrine of indirect escalation through asymmetric networks contrasts sharply with Saudi Arabia's reliance on formal alliances, particularly with the United States. This divergence produces competition that is rarely fought through direct interstate war but instead unfolds through proxy arenas, political influence, and strategic signaling.

The result is a pattern of managed confrontation — calibrated escalation, deterrence posturing, and influence-building across contested spaces such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Each side seeks to prevent decisive defeat while constraining the other's regional reach.

Thus, the rivalry is not merely ideological or sectarian; it is rooted in incompatible security architectures — one built on asymmetric depth and deniable escalation, the other on alliance-backed conventional deterrence. This structural mismatch sustains a persistent balance of tension that shapes the broader Middle Eastern strategic order.

Enhance. In contrast, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia anchors its security posture in formal defense partnerships. As a longstanding ally of the United States, Saudi Arabia relies on structured military cooperation, advanced arms procurement, and alliance-based deterrence to secure its regional position. As a longstanding strategic partner of the United States, Riyadh leverages comprehensive military cooperation, cutting-edge arms acquisitions, and coordinated joint exercises to strengthen its conventional capabilities. This alliance-based framework provides credible deterrence against regional adversaries, underpinned by shared intelligence, advanced technology transfer, and integrated defense planning. By embedding its security posture within a network of international partnerships, Saudi Arabia seeks to project stability, reinforce strategic depth, and safeguard its influence in a region characterized by asymmetrical threats and persistent geopolitical rivalry.

The clash of strategies between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia implies a structural and enduring regional rivalry rather than episodic tension. Iran's doctrine of indirect escalation through asymmetric networks contrasts sharply with Saudi Arabia's reliance on formal alliances, particularly with the United States. This divergence produces competition that is rarely fought through direct interstate war but instead unfolds through proxy arenas, political influence, and strategic signaling. The result is a pattern of managed confrontation — calibrated escalation, deterrence posturing, and influence-building across contested spaces such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Each side seeks to prevent decisive defeat while constraining the other's regional reach. Thus, the rivalry is not merely ideological or sectarian; it is rooted in incompatible security architectures — one built on asymmetric depth and deniable escalation, the other on alliance-backed conventional deterrence. This structural mismatch sustains a persistent balance of tension that shapes the broader Middle Eastern strategic order.

In practice, Iran aims to secure U.S. recognition as the principal security arbiter of the Gulf. Its efforts reflect a desire to assert influence and legitimacy in regional affairs. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia relies on patient and pragmatic petro-dollar diplomacy to safeguard its interests and shape outcomes without direct confrontation. Optimally deployed, this economic leverage can serve not only national priorities but also the broader stability of the Gulf. Ultimately, both approaches could be aligned to advance the shared interests of the region and the wider Muslim world.

The impact of domestic politics on the KSA-Iran Rivalry

In Iran, the population faces severe economic hardship characterized by high inflation, a collapsing currency, and the rising cost of basic goods, which has placed considerable strain on families and workers across urban and rural areas. Many Iranians demand greater political freedom, including the ability to express dissent, participate in governance, and hold leaders accountable, reflecting widespread frustration with theocratic control and restrictions on civil liberties. Government corruption, mismanagement of public services, and prioritization of foreign interventions over domestic welfare further exacerbate public discontent, contributing to large-scale protests that have erupted in multiple cities, including Tehran, Rasht, and Mashhad. The regime, led by the Supreme Leader and security apparatus, prioritizes the preservation of power and the suppression of political dissent, frequently employing force, internet blackouts, and purges of reformist politicians to maintain authority and narrative control. The state frames external threats and Western sanctions as central factors in domestic

difficulties, often attempting to deflect responsibility from internal governance failures. Domestically, the most significant conflicts in Iran involve the population's demands for reform and economic relief in opposition to the state's coercive measures, intra-elite struggles between hard-liners and reformists, and generational tensions as younger citizens, particularly students, challenge the established political order.

In Saudi Arabia, the citizenry's primary concerns revolve around employment, economic opportunity, and social modernization, with attention focused on the successful implementation of Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy beyond oil dependency and foster private-sector growth. Social change, including increased participation of women in public life and the expansion of cultural and entertainment opportunities, has generated tension between modernizing segments of society and conservative elements that resist rapid transformation. Citizens are also attentive to quality-of-life improvements, encompassing infrastructure, digital services, and public amenities. The Saudi government prioritizes economic transformation, national stability, and the enhancement of international investment and reputation while carefully controlling political expression and limiting large-scale dissent. The regime has enforced strict immigration and labor policies to maintain order, reflecting a broader strategy to balance modernization with social control. Domestic conflicts in Saudi Arabia primarily emerge from the tension between reform and tradition, the limitations on civil liberties despite modernization efforts, and the management of migrant labor rights within the context of the Kingdom's demographic and economic landscape.

In summary, Iran exhibits acute domestic crisis conditions in which the population's urgent needs for economic stability, political reform, and human security are in direct tension with the regime's imperative to preserve authority and suppress dissent, resulting in widespread protest activity and social fragmentation. Saudi Arabia demonstrates a comparatively stable domestic environment in which the population's aspirations for economic opportunity and social modernization coexist with the regime's priorities of economic diversification, political stability, and carefully managed social change, producing more controlled and structured domestic conflicts.

Table

Dimension	Iran	Saudi Arabia	Implications for Dyadic Relations & Foreign Policy Autonomy
Population Needs	Economic survival amid inflation, joblessness, and rising cost of basic goods; political freedom and accountability; human security	Employment, economic opportunity, social modernization, quality-of-life improvements.	Iran's internal unrest constrains aggressive foreign action; Saudi citizens' tolerance for costly conflicts is low. Both states' domestic pressures influence risk calculation in the dyad.
Regime Priorities	Preservation of power, suppression of dissent, control of narrative, regime legitimacy; managing sanctions and external threats	Economic transformation (Vision 2030), national stability, controlled social modernization, international	Both regimes seek to preserve legitimacy, which may encourage cautious diplomacy; misperception of the other's domestic constraints could escalate tensions.

		investment and reputation	
Main Domestic Conflicts	Citizens vs. state repression; hard-liners vs. reformists; generational divides	Reform vs. tradition; civil liberties vs. political control; migrant labor rights	Domestic conflict pressures limit the scope of foreign policy; in Iran, the need to contain protests may reduce regional adventurism; in Saudi Arabia, the regime's focus on stability tempers engagement with Iran.
Impact on Foreign Policy Autonomy	Domestic unrest reduces flexibility in regional interventions and nuclear negotiations	Public tolerance and social cohesion limit escalation in regional confrontations	Dyadic interaction is shaped by internal constraints; opportunities for dialogue exist, but misinterpretation of restraint as weakness may intensify rivalry.
Measures to Reduce Domestic Pressure on Foreign Policy	Economic stabilization, measured political concessions, de-escalation of high-profile interventions, restoring public services	Continued economic growth, gradual social reforms, strategic public communication, managed labor policies	Strengthening internal legitimacy allows both states to negotiate and act in the region without reactive, domestic-driven policies, reducing miscalculations in bilateral relations.

This cross-tab synthesizes the domestic and foreign policy dynamics and shows how internal conditions directly shape bilateral behavior and the room each state has to maneuver internationally.

Scholars also discuss the importance of phased diplomacy, beginning with technical agreements before tackling more politically sensitive issues. Confidence-building steps such as joint monitoring, arms transparency, and coordinated humanitarian initiatives are seen as essential precursors to broader negotiations. There is a consensus that ignoring domestic narratives risks undermining agreements, making public diplomacy and messaging critical. Analysts highlight the need to insulate negotiations from broader superpower competition to maintain credibility. A diplomatic roadmap could begin with limited technical cooperation, move to formal agreements on proxy conflicts, and culminate in broader regional security frameworks. Superpowers can support but should not dominate these processes to avoid exacerbating perceptions of bias. Establishing dispute resolution mechanisms within regional institutions can reinforce the sustainability of agreements. Scholars suggest using economic interdependence, such as energy coordination and trade facilitation, to create incentives for cooperation. Regular, institutionalized dialogue at multiple levels—security, economic, political—is identified as critical. Engagement must be iterative, allowing incremental trust-building and the testing of commitments.

The literature underscores that successful diplomacy requires addressing both structural inequalities and psychological barriers rooted in decades of mistrust. Negotiations should integrate non-state actors and civil society where possible to enhance legitimacy. Scholars emphasize the importance of transparent monitoring mechanisms to prevent violations and sustain confidence. Overall, the literature portrays the Saudi–Iran rivalry as complex, multidimensional, and historically entrenched, requiring a combination of incremental, multilateral, and trust-based diplomatic strategies.

A practical roadmap suggested by the literature begins with confidence-building measures, proceeds through technical and economic cooperation, addresses proxy conflicts, and culminates in institutionalized regional security arrangements. Superpower involvement should be facilitative, supporting dialogue and providing neutral mediation without imposing solutions. Success depends on linking security, economic, and political dimensions in an integrated approach. The ultimate goal is a reduction in regional instability, more predictable interstate behavior, and the creation of durable mechanisms for managing competition without escalation.

Phase 1: Preparation & Confidence-Building

The first phase focuses on preparation and confidence-building. A joint scholarly review of historical grievances and conflicts can help identify patterns and misperceptions. Confidential bilateral dialogue should be conducted to assess each side's perceived security threats and red lines. Track II dialogues involving academics, religious leaders, and civil society actors can provide neutral perspectives and reduce mistrust. Discreet back-channel diplomacy allows preliminary agreements to be explored without public pressure. Developing shared media narratives can help reduce inflammatory sectarian rhetoric, while initiating low-risk technical cooperation on issues such as energy security, fisheries, and port safety fosters practical collaboration. Military transparency measures, including the sharing of limited information on exercises, can reduce the risk of accidental escalation. Humanitarian cooperation on refugees, health, or disaster relief initiatives can generate goodwill. Engaging a neutral regional or international mediator provides an impartial framework for negotiations. Independent monitoring mechanisms ensure adherence to early agreements and build trust.

Phase 2: Structured Negotiation & Limited Agreements

The second phase emphasizes structured negotiation and the implementation of limited agreements. Defining clear strategic objectives allows each party to understand the limits of compromise. Agreements on localized ceasefires and de-escalation zones in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq help manage proxy conflicts. Economic coordination, particularly in oil production and pricing, reduces zero-sum competition. Formal regional security dialogues that include smaller Gulf Cooperation Council states and Iraq create a broader platform for cooperation. Drafting preliminary legal and diplomatic frameworks on borders, trade, and maritime navigation establishes shared rules of engagement. Establishing joint working groups on energy, trade, and security issues operationalizes cooperation. Cultural and religious engagement, including interfaith initiatives and academic exchanges, can mitigate ideological tensions. Agreements on media transparency help reduce inflammatory reporting and disinformation campaigns. Phased implementation allows cooperation to begin with low-risk areas and gradually expand. Regular review and adaptation ensure that progress is monitored, violations are addressed, and strategies are adjusted as needed.

Phase 3: Institutionalization & Long-Term Cooperation

The third phase focuses on institutionalization and long-term cooperation. Developing a regional security architecture that incorporates both Iran and Saudi Arabia can provide a stable framework for conflict management. Negotiating arms control agreements, including

limitations on missile deployments, naval exercises, and military expansion, addresses the security dilemma. Facilitating joint economic infrastructure, trade, and energy projects generates mutual benefits and reinforces interdependence. Establishing a permanent crisis management mechanism, including a hotline and rapid response system, improves the ability to address incidents before escalation. Creating a regional arbitration or mediation institution provides a structured platform for resolving disputes. Engaging civil society, NGOs, universities, and youth organizations in dialogue increases legitimacy and broadens support for cooperation. Co-developing long-term strategic plans addresses regional pressures related to climate, energy, and demographics. External powers should be integrated as facilitators rather than dominant actors, preventing the projection of superpower rivalries onto local issues. Public diplomacy and transparency allow both societies to understand the progress and challenges of cooperation. Periodic evaluation and feedback loops ensure that all agreements are reviewed, progress is tracked, and strategies are adapted to changing geopolitical realities.

This roadmap balances scholarly insights, including conflict theory, trust-building, phased negotiation, and institutional design, with practical considerations such as managing proxy wars, maritime security, and energy interdependence. Emphasizing incremental confidence-building, proxy conflict management, and institutionalized mechanisms draws on lessons from historical Gulf diplomacy and other long-standing rivalries. It provides a comprehensive framework to reduce mistrust, promote cooperation, and establish durable pathways for stability in the Gulf region.

5.Internal Disputes in GCC

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was founded in 1981 to foster political, economic, and security cooperation among the six member states. Its creation reflected the recognition that the Gulf's small and medium-sized monarchies faced common security threats and economic challenges. Despite its ambitious mandate, the GCC has historically struggled with internal cohesion. Divergent national interests among member states have repeatedly limited the organization's ability to act collectively. Sovereignty concerns often take precedence over regional institutional obligations, creating a persistent tension between national prerogatives and supranational goals.

The 2017–2021 Qatar blockade exemplifies the fragility of GCC unity in the face of personal and political rivalries. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain imposed sanctions against Qatar, citing allegations of supporting terrorism and aligning too closely with Iran. Qatar's response highlighted the limits of GCC mediation mechanisms and underscored the absence of formal enforcement powers within the Council. The blockade disrupted regional trade, air travel, and diplomatic relations, illustrating the tangible costs of internal disputes. Scholars emphasize that such conflicts are not isolated events but rather manifestations of structural vulnerabilities within the organization.

The Qatari-Saudi conflict primarily revolves around political influence, ideological differences, and regional alliances in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and some of its allies perceive Qatar's foreign policy—particularly its support for groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and its independent regional stance—as challenging the Saudi-led bloc's unity. Qatar, in contrast, asserts its sovereignty and strategic autonomy in foreign affairs. The role of Al Jazeera has also

been a point of contention, as Saudi Arabia and others see it as promoting narratives contrary to their interests. Additionally, Qatar maintains close ties with Iran and Turkey at times, which contrasts with Saudi Arabia's traditional regional alignment. The rivalry is partly about influence within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and broader Middle East politics.

Solutions lie in diplomatic dialogue and mediation. Past mediation efforts by Kuwait and other neutral parties have shown that sustained dialogue is crucial. Confidence-building measures such as addressing mutual security concerns, establishing agreements on media conduct, and clarifying foreign policy intentions can reduce tensions. Strengthening GCC frameworks for dispute resolution and cooperation can help manage differences without escalation. Enhancing trade, energy collaboration, and infrastructure projects can create incentives for cooperation.

Essentially, the conflict is less about open warfare and more about competition for influence and policy alignment in the Gulf. Its resolution requires patience, structured diplomacy, and mutual recognition of sovereignty and security concerns.

Historical analyses indicate that competition for regional influence has been a constant source of tension since the GCC's founding. Economic disparities among member states, particularly between oil-rich and less-endowed economies, exacerbate these tensions. Smaller states often align with larger neighbors in order to maximize security guarantees, creating shifting alliances within the Council. Leadership dynamics and personal relationships between monarchs play a significant role in shaping intra-GCC disputes. Domestic political considerations often influence foreign policy, as leaders seek to project strength or legitimacy.

The interplay of ideology, religion, and tribal affiliations further complicates cooperative efforts. Scholars argue that internal disputes are exacerbated by the GCC's consensus-based decision-making process. While this approach is intended to prevent domination by a single state, it often leads to stalemates. The Council's institutional architecture lacks independent enforcement mechanisms or binding dispute resolution procedures. As a result, member states frequently bypass formal channels in favor of unilateral action. The Qatar crisis revealed the limitations of informal mediation and the absence of neutral arbitration within the GCC. External factors, including the influence of regional powers like Iran and Iraq, also shape internal disputes. Saudi–Iranian rivalry, in particular, forces GCC states to adopt differentiated policies, which can strain intra-Council relations. Geopolitical shifts, such as the Arab Spring, further tested the Council's ability to maintain cohesion. Economic competition, especially in energy markets and investment flows, adds another layer of complexity.

Resource allocation, investment priorities, and development strategies often become sources of disagreement. Scholars note that while the GCC has established mechanisms for economic coordination, these are often undermined by unilateral initiatives. Defense and security collaboration, while rhetorically emphasized, is hampered by mutual distrust and differing threat perceptions. Joint military initiatives, such as the Peninsula Shield Force, have rarely been deployed effectively in crises. The lack of a centralized command or enforcement structure reduces the Council's capacity to respond to internal disputes. Cultural and societal differences, including media narratives and public opinion, also play a role in exacerbating tensions. Member states often use domestic media to project narratives that influence perceptions of other members.

This can inflame nationalist sentiment and constrain diplomatic compromise. Academic literature stresses the importance of trust-building as a prerequisite for sustainable cooperation. Confidence-building measures, transparent communication, and shared institutions are critical for reducing misunderstandings. Track II diplomacy and civil society engagement can complement formal GCC structures. Dialogue platforms that involve scholars, religious leaders, and policy experts offer neutral channels for discussion. Incremental cooperation on low-risk issues, such as trade facilitation, education, and energy coordination, can generate goodwill. Successful collaboration in these areas may provide the basis for tackling more sensitive political disputes. Scholars highlight that economic interdependence can serve as a stabilizing factor in the Gulf. Joint infrastructure projects and cross-border investments can create shared interests that reduce incentives for confrontation.

A phased approach to dispute resolution, starting with technical and economic issues, is more likely to succeed than attempts at comprehensive political settlement. Institutional reforms, including the establishment of binding arbitration mechanisms, are recommended to manage conflicts more effectively. External mediators can provide technical expertise and neutral facilitation, but must avoid imposing solutions.

Transparency in decision-making and communication enhances legitimacy and fosters mutual understanding. Public diplomacy campaigns can help manage domestic perceptions and reduce nationalist pressures. Learning from historical crises, GCC members can identify structural weaknesses and adapt institutional frameworks. Scholarly consensus suggests that addressing both structural and psychological barriers is necessary for sustainable cohesion. Internal disputes within the GCC are thus multidimensional, involving political, economic, and social dimensions. They are driven by a combination of national interests, leadership dynamics, and structural institutional limitations. Understanding these disputes requires a holistic analysis of historical, geopolitical, and economic contexts.

Despite recurring tensions, the GCC remains an important platform for dialogue and regional coordination. Its ability to adapt and reform will determine its future relevance in Gulf politics. While internal disputes cannot be eliminated entirely, structured engagement and incremental cooperation can mitigate their impact. Over time, sustained efforts at institutional strengthening, confidence-building, and collaborative initiatives could enhance the resilience of the Council. The study of GCC internal disputes provides broader lessons for regionalism in the Middle East. These lessons underscore the challenges of balancing sovereignty, institutional cohesion, and regional security in a complex and dynamic environment.

The infographic "Navigating Internal Disputes in the GCC" provides a clear, structured overview of the sources, institutional vulnerabilities, and potential solutions for intra-GCC tensions. It effectively separates the content into three visually distinct sections: drivers of disputes, institutional weaknesses, and strategies for resolution, which enhances comprehension. The depiction of drivers such as divergent foreign policies, economic rivalries, leadership dynamics, and sectarian or geopolitical tensions reflects the scholarly consensus on root causes, as highlighted by Legrenzi (2011) and Bianco & Stansfield (2018).

Figure

Institutional weaknesses, including the lack of binding enforcement mechanisms, consensus deadlocks, informal mediation, and gaps in security coordination, are well represented, emphasizing structural barriers to effective conflict management. The strategies for resolution—confidence-building, Track II dialogues, economic cooperation, arbitration, and security mechanisms—illustrate practical, incremental approaches recommended in the literature, particularly by Altamimi (2020) and Nuruzzaman (2015). The use of icons, concise labels, and color coding makes complex concepts immediately accessible and allows viewers to trace causal and remedial relationships at a glance. Embedding the scholarly references at the bottom lends credibility and signals that the infographic is grounded in evidence-based research. The flow from root causes to institutional limitations and then to solutions visually mirrors the logical analytical framework of conflict studies. However, while visually comprehensive, the infographic could further benefit from indicating the interconnections among drivers and weaknesses to show feedback loops that perpetuate disputes. Overall, it serves as an effective educational and policy tool, synthesizing decades of scholarship into an actionable, visually engaging roadmap for understanding and addressing GCC internal disputes.

6.Strait of Hormuz tensions

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most strategically significant maritime chokepoints in the world, linking the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Its narrow geography, just over 20 miles wide at the narrowest point, makes it highly sensitive to military and geopolitical disruption (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999). Approximately 20–30% of global seaborne oil trade passes through the strait, including the vast majority of exports from Saudi Arabia,

Iran, and the UAE (Ramazani, 2024). Scholars emphasize that the economic stakes elevate the strait from a regional concern to a global security issue (Fishman, 2025).

Tensions in the strait often reflect broader Gulf regional rivalries, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which contest influence over shipping lanes, maritime borders, and adjacent territories (Rizkiyani et al., 2025). The historical roots of these tensions are embedded in post-1979 Iranian revolutionary policy, which challenged established Gulf monarchies and reshaped regional security dynamics (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999).

Scholars note that Iran's asymmetric naval capabilities, including small fast-attack craft and anti-ship missile systems, aim to offset conventional military disadvantages (Awan, Abdullah, & Shahab, 2025). The United States and other global powers are frequently drawn into Strait of Hormuz dynamics due to their reliance on oil flows and commitments to Gulf security (Damayanti, Meresin, & Libertho, 2022). Scholars often analyze these interactions through security dilemma frameworks, noting that defensive measures by one state are often perceived as offensive threats by another (Tariq, Ali, & Kiran, 2025). Maritime incidents, including ship seizures, threats to tankers, and mine-laying, have heightened tensions and demonstrate the strait's vulnerability to conflict escalation (Zulkifli & Ariffin, 2019). Academic approaches emphasize both structural and agent-level factors, analyzing how geography, resources, and state strategies interact to produce repeated crises (Ramazani, 2024).

The strait's narrowness amplifies the potential consequences of miscalculation, making careful risk assessment essential in scholarly studies (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999). Scholars employ historical-comparative methods, examining past crises such as the Iran-Iraq War's effects on shipping and the 2019 tanker attacks in the Gulf of Oman (Fishman, 2025). Economic interdependence theory is also applied to understand why Gulf states, despite hostility, avoid full-scale closure of the strait (Rizkiyani et al., 2025). Scholars highlight that U.S. and allied naval patrols have a stabilizing yet sometimes provocative effect, complicating regional security dynamics (Damayanti, Meresin, & Libertho, 2022). Iranian narratives frame their military posture as a legitimate defense of territorial waters, while Western and Gulf states often interpret it as coercive diplomacy (Awan, Abdullah, & Shahab, 2025). Scholarly discourse recognizes that non-state actors, including commercial shipping companies and private security contractors, are also impacted by these tensions (Zulkifli & Ariffin, 2019).

Scholars often integrate political geography and maritime law perspectives, particularly UNCLOS provisions, to evaluate legitimacy and control claims (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999). The potential for accidental escalation is a recurring theme in academic analyses, highlighting the need for robust crisis communication channels (Ramazani, 2024). Scenario-based modeling is commonly used to assess the impact of hypothetical closures on global oil markets and regional stability (Fishman, 2025). Scholars also examine the domestic political imperatives driving Iranian and Gulf state behavior, including regime security and public legitimacy (Tariq, Ali, & Kiran, 2025). The strait's military geography favors smaller, agile forces over large conventional navies, a point often stressed in strategic studies literature (Awan, Abdullah, & Shahab, 2025). Historical case studies of incidents like the Tanker War during the Iran-Iraq conflict inform contemporary risk assessments (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999).

Scholars pay close attention to signaling and misperception, as limited communication between actors can rapidly escalate tensions (Damayanti, Meresin, & Libertho, 2022). The presence of mines, anti-ship missiles, and asymmetric tactics contributes to a persistent threat environment (Zulkifli & Ariffin, 2019). Analysts often note that global oil price volatility reflects not only market fundamentals but also perceived instability in the strait (Fishman, 2025). The scholarly approach emphasizes multi-level analysis, combining international relations theory, security studies, and maritime economics (Ramazani, 2024). Researchers also focus on multilateral mechanisms for de-escalation, including U.S.-Iran communication channels and the potential role of regional organizations (Tariq, Ali, & Kiran, 2025). The strait's security is further complicated by regional conflicts, such as in Yemen, which indirectly influence naval postures and perceptions of threat (Rizkiyani et al., 2025). Academic work frequently highlights the asymmetry of power between Iran and the U.S./Saudi coalition, exploring how asymmetric strategies shape crisis dynamics (Awan, Abdullah, & Shahab, 2025). Scholars argue that confidence-building measures, joint patrols, and maritime transparency can reduce the probability of accidental confrontation (Damayanti, Meresin, & Libertho, 2022). Scenario planning often includes the potential effects of sanctions, embargoes, and maritime blockades on both regional economies and global energy markets (Fishman, 2025). Historical analyses of the Tanker War illustrate how commercial vulnerability interacts with military strategy to heighten stakes (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999).

Political economy frameworks are used to assess how Gulf states manage strategic dependence on the strait while pursuing autonomy (Rizkiyani et al., 2025). Scholars highlight the role of Oman as a stabilizing neighbor, whose cooperation with Iran helps reduce regional friction (Zulkifli & Ariffin, 2019). Academic studies also note that repeated minor incidents contribute to a cumulative escalation risk, even when no single event is decisive (Ramazani, 2024). The integration of naval power projection, air defense, and missile deployment forms a central focus of strategic analyses (Awan, Abdullah, & Shahab, 2025). Scholars stress the importance of legal frameworks and freedom of navigation operations in maintaining international norms (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999). Comparative analysis with other global chokepoints, such as the Malacca and Bab el-Mandeb Straits, informs policy recommendations for Hormuz (Fishman, 2025). The academic consensus is that multi-dimensional strategies, combining diplomacy, maritime security, and economic interdependence, are essential for risk mitigation (Rizkiyani et al., 2025). Scholars also examine signaling behavior, including naval exercises, ship inspections, and media statements, as instruments of coercion or deterrence (Damayanti, Meresin, & Libertho, 2022).

Historical and contemporary data are often triangulated to model potential flashpoints in the strait (Tariq, Ali, & Kiran, 2025). Maritime situational awareness, including satellite and intelligence sharing, is emphasized as a practical component of tension management (Awan, Abdullah, & Shahab, 2025). Academic research increasingly considers climate change and maritime traffic growth as compounding factors affecting strategic calculations (Ramazani, 2024).

Figure

The strait's centrality to energy security ensures that any conflict has immediate global ramifications, reinforcing the need for scholarly policy analysis (Fishman, 2025). Scholars advocate phased engagement, confidence-building, and institutional mechanisms to reduce risk while preserving strategic interests (Zulkifli & Ariffin, 2019). Multilateral forums, including U.N. or IAEA involvement, are often proposed as neutral venues for dispute resolution (Rizkiyani et al., 2025). The role of private commercial actors and insurance markets is also considered in academic models of Hormuz risk (Damayanti, Meresin, & Libertho, 2022). Finally, scholarly approaches underscore the importance of integrating historical lessons, asymmetric naval theory, and global energy dependence into coherent policy frameworks to manage tensions in the Strait of Hormuz (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999; Ramazani, 2024; Fishman, 2025).

The Infographic demonstrates that the Strait of Hormuz is a critical maritime chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman. Its narrow width and strategic location make it central to global energy flows. Roughly 20–30% of seaborne oil trade passes through the strait, particularly from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999; Ramazani, 2024). Tensions in the strait arise from a combination of geopolitical rivalries, economic stakes, and military escalation risks. The Iran–Saudi rivalry dominates the geopolitical landscape, influencing naval posturing and regional alliances. The United States and allied powers intervene to safeguard freedom of navigation and counter perceived Iranian aggression. Gulf states, including Oman and the UAE, are concerned with maintaining maritime security and the uninterrupted export of oil. Economic stakes amplify the risk of conflict, as disruptions in the strait have immediate global consequences.

Military escalation risks are heightened by asymmetric naval capabilities and repeated maritime confrontations. Iran leverages fast-attack craft, missile systems, and asymmetric tactics to deter larger naval forces. Gulf states rely on conventional military strength and alliances with Western powers for security. Oman often serves as a stabilizing actor due to its neutral posture and historical mediation role. Maritime chokepoint vulnerabilities make the

strait highly sensitive to even minor incidents. Strategic dynamics include a classic security dilemma, where defensive measures by one state are perceived as offensive threats by others. Economic leverage through oil exports and sanctions adds another layer of strategic complexity. Repeated maritime confrontations, including tanker seizures and threats, illustrate the persistent risk environment. Asymmetric warfare strategies by Iran create uncertainty for shipping companies and global markets. Multilateral stakeholders, including the EU, Japan, and other energy-importing nations, are indirectly affected by strait instability. Scholars emphasize that misperception and poor crisis communication exacerbate risks. Risk mitigation strategies identified include confidence-building measures and Track II dialogues.

Naval transparency and coordinated freedom of navigation operations can reduce the chance of accidental escalation. Multilateral mediation through neutral actors or international organizations can facilitate dialogue. Crisis communication channels between navies and governments help manage emergencies. Energy diversification reduces vulnerability to disruptions in the strait. Academic references embedded in the infographic include Ramazani (2024), Mojtahed-Zadeh (1999), Fishman (2025), Rizkiyani et al. (2025), and Damayanti et al. (2022). Visual mapping of the strait demonstrates the interconnection of drivers, actors, and mitigation strategies. The infographic clarifies the relationship between strategic dynamics and practical responses. It highlights how geopolitical rivalries, economic stakes, and military factors interact in shaping regional security. The presence of international allies underscores the global implications of local disputes. Embedded references provide an evidence-based foundation for policy discussions. Overall, the infographic synthesizes the complex dynamics of the Strait of Hormuz in a visually clear, scholarly manner.

A GCC Convention on Maritime Safety is outlined in the annex, without prejudice to the Indean-led cooperative security regime in maritime affairs, even as the riparians start learning to cooperate.

Policy Roadmap for Addressing Strait of Hormuz Tensions

1. Historical and Strategic Assessment: Conduct a comprehensive review of past incidents, geopolitical patterns, and naval deployments.
2. Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogue: Initiate confidential Track II dialogues among Iran, Gulf states, and major stakeholders.
3. Confidence-Building Measures: Establish low-risk cooperative initiatives, such as joint search-and-rescue drills and environmental monitoring.
4. Maritime Transparency Agreements: Share schedules of naval exercises and commercial shipping routes to reduce misperceptions.
5. Crisis Communication Channels: Implement a real-time hotline between Iranian, Gulf, and U.S. naval commands.
6. Conflict Scenario Modeling: Conduct joint exercises simulating potential closures or disruptions to identify risks and mitigation strategies.
7. Legal and Normative Frameworks: Reinforce adherence to UNCLOS and international maritime law governing navigation rights.
8. Economic Interdependence Initiatives: Encourage joint investments in port infrastructure and energy logistics to create mutual incentives for stability.

9. Neutral Mediation Platforms: Involve Oman, the UN, or IAEA as neutral facilitators for dialogue on maritime and energy security.
10. Asymmetric Threat Management: Develop protocols for responding to small-scale naval threats without escalation.
11. Energy Diversification Strategies: Promote pipelines, storage, and alternative export routes to reduce the global impact of strait disruptions.
12. Multilateral Security Forums: Establish a regional maritime security council including Gulf states, Iran, and external allies.
13. Joint Monitoring Mechanisms: Deploy neutral observers or satellite-based monitoring for shipping lanes and military movements.
14. Phased Implementation: Begin with low-risk measures and gradually escalate to more politically sensitive initiatives.
15. Public Diplomacy: Communicate successes and agreements to domestic audiences to reduce nationalist pressures.
16. Conflict De-escalation Protocols: Predefine responses for incidents, including grounding ships, warnings, and mediation steps.
17. Integration of External Powers: Use U.S., EU, or other allies as technical facilitators rather than dominant decision-makers.
18. Regular Review: Periodically assess and adjust measures based on evolving regional dynamics.
19. Capacity-Building Programs: Train maritime personnel in negotiation, coordination, and joint security operations.
20. Environmental Cooperation: Collaborate on oil spill prevention and disaster response to create positive engagement.
21. Joint Economic Projects: Encourage shared port or energy facility management to reinforce interdependence.
22. Early Warning Systems: Develop predictive intelligence for naval and commercial threats.
23. Scenario-Based Negotiations: Use simulations to test the effectiveness of mitigation strategies before crises occur.
24. Gradual Military De-escalation: Explore limits on missile deployment and naval exercises near key chokepoints.
25. Track III Civil Society Engagement: Involve shipping companies, insurers, and NGOs in risk reduction discussions.
26. Formalize Agreements: Codify protocols and confidence-building measures into binding agreements where possible.
27. Cultural and Academic Exchanges: Build trust among policymakers and analysts to support long-term dialogue.
28. Transparency Reports: Issue joint reports on strait traffic, incidents, and compliance with agreed protocols.
29. Incentivized Cooperation: Link dispute resolution and joint projects to economic or development incentives.
30. Evaluation and Feedback Loop: Continually monitor progress, incorporate lessons learned, and adjust policy measures.

Summary

The strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the most enduring interstate conflicts in the Middle East, shaped by competing visions of regional order, ideological differences, and geopolitical ambitions since the late twentieth century. This rivalry operates simultaneously at political, cultural, and symbolic levels, with each state seeking regional primacy, influence over smaller Gulf monarchies, and leadership within the Islamic world. The Saudi–Iran confrontation has historically been expressed through proxy engagements, most visibly in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, where each power supports aligned groups to expand its strategic reach. Sectarian narratives—casting Iran as a Shia champion and Saudi Arabia as the leading Sunni power—have been exploited to mobilize support and frame the rivalry, although underlying drivers include power competition and security dilemmas beyond sectarianism. Attempts to manage this rivalry have seen intermittent diplomatic engagement, but deep structural differences remain unresolved.

Within the Gulf region, the GCC was established to institutionalize cooperation among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman, seeking collective security and economic integration in the face of shared threats. However, the GCC has experienced internal conflicts, reflecting divergent national priorities, leadership interactions, and varying threat perceptions, particularly during crises such as the 2017–2021 blockade against Qatar. These internal disputes have demonstrated the limitations of consensus-based decision-making and the absence of robust intra-GCC dispute resolution mechanisms, leading member states to pursue unilateral policies when agreements falter.

The GCC's internal dynamics cannot be understood apart from the larger Saudi–Iran rivalry, as some Gulf monarchies align more closely with Saudi policy while others seek more balanced relations with Iran, creating fault lines within the council. The Strait of Hormuz lies at the heart of these intersecting tensions due to its role as a vital chokepoint for global energy flows, with about one-fifth of the world's crude and liquefied gas transiting the narrow waterway daily, making it a focal point for strategic calculations. Iranian threats to close or disrupt the strait have been employed as leverage in broader geopolitical confrontations, including in response to sanctions or military pressures, underscoring how maritime security is intertwined with interstate rivalries. Episodes such as the 2019 reported sabotage of commercial ships off the Gulf of Oman reveal how tensions around Hormuz can spill into broader regional crises, attract external naval deployments, and heighten risk for global energy markets.

The strategic geography of the strait amplifies risks because narrow sea lanes, proximity to Iranian territory, and the presence of multiple naval actors increase the potential for miscalculation and escalation. International actors, including Western naval forces, are routinely engaged in escorting commercial shipping and conducting joint exercises to reassure Gulf partners, demonstrating the global dimension of Hormuz security. Internal GCC interests in the strait reflect not only fears of disruption to oil exports and fiscal revenues but also concerns about how maritime insecurity can reinforce broader regional fractures. Economic analyses show that a protracted disruption of the strait could have severe consequences for GCC government budgets, stock markets, and supply chains due to dependency on both energy exports and imports via maritime routes. Oman's traditionally neutral posture and occasional

diplomatic brokerage in Hormuz matters provide a counterbalance to more confrontational positions and illustrate intra-GCC variation in threat perception and foreign policy.

Collectively, these state-to-state rivalries, internal GCC dynamics, and Hormuz tensions illustrate a regional security complex where local conflicts are magnified by international involvement, energy interdependence, and historical grievances. The interlocking nature of these disputes means that shifts in Saudi–Iran relations can ripple through GCC cohesion and maritime security calculus, while maritime incidents can feed back into interstate distrust. A comprehensive scholarly approach to these intertwined tensions requires integrating security studies, regional integration theory, and energy geopolitics. This includes attention to structural factors such as military asymmetries, external power presence, economic dependencies, and institutional shortcomings within regional organizations. The persistence of these conflicts suggests that without sustained diplomatic engagement and confidence-building mechanisms, sporadic escalations will remain likely. Ultimately, progress toward de-escalation depends on both bilateral Saudi–Iran engagement and strengthened institutional frameworks within the Gulf to manage internal disputes and coordinate responses to external shocks such as maritime insecurity.

SOCIETAL CONFLICTS

7. Sectarian Strife

Sectarian strife in the Persian Gulf is a defining feature of regional politics, shaping domestic and interstate relations for decades (Wehrey, 2013). The rivalry between Sunni-dominated monarchies and Shia communities underpins much of this tension (Potter, 2014). Historical factors, including colonial interventions, state-building, and religious institutional development, have deepened sectarian divisions (Al Shehabi, 2019). Vali Nasr emphasizes that sectarian identity is not merely theological but functions as a political instrument used by states and non-state actors to mobilize support and consolidate power (Nasr, 2006). Sunni-Shia divides are particularly pronounced in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, eastern Saudi urban centers, and parts of Kuwait (Matthiesen, 2013).

In Iran, sectarian identity has been leveraged to promote its revolutionary ideology and regional influence (Nasr, 2006). Saudi Arabia and other GCC states have used sectarian narratives to reinforce state legitimacy and marginalize perceived opposition (Wehrey, 2013). The 1979 Iranian Revolution heightened regional awareness of sectarian politics, inspiring movements and heightening Sunni anxieties (Potter, 2014). In Bahrain, Shia communities have historically faced political and economic marginalization, which has periodically sparked unrest (Al Shehabi, 2019). Kuwait has navigated sectarian tensions through institutional inclusion but still experiences social and political friction (Wehrey, 2013).

Sectarian identity interacts with class, tribal affiliation, and political exclusion, creating complex fault lines within Gulf societies (Zeineddin, 2025). Media, both state-controlled and independent, amplify sectarian narratives, often framing domestic dissent as externally inspired or religiously motivated (Matthiesen, 2013). External actors, including Iran and Western powers, have at times exacerbated local tensions by backing aligned groups (Nasr, 2006). The Arab Spring revealed the latent potential for sectarian mobilization in the Gulf, especially in

Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia (Wehrey, 2013). Scholars argue that sectarian strife is a mechanism for elite survival, allowing ruling families to divert attention from governance failures (Potter, 2014).

The interplay between domestic grievances and regional rivalries intensifies the stakes of sectarian conflict (Nasr, 2006). Nasr emphasizes that sectarianism becomes a tool in transnational power competition, notably between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Nasr, 2006). Security policies in the Gulf frequently prioritize the suppression of Shia political activism under the guise of countering Iranian influence (Matthiesen, 2013). Economic disparities, particularly in marginalized Shia-majority areas, reinforce perceptions of exclusion and discrimination (Al Shehabi, 2019). Historical memory of sectarian persecution informs contemporary political mobilization and resistance (Zeineddin, 2025).

Education and religious institutions have sometimes perpetuated sectarian narratives, reinforcing societal divisions (Wehrey, 2013). Scholars note that sectarian strife is cyclical, often flaring during periods of political instability or external threat (Potter, 2014). The securitization of sectarian identity creates a feedback loop that reinforces state paranoia and communal tension (Nasr, 2006). Nasr highlights that the politicization of religion often overshadows socioeconomic and governance issues in shaping Gulf conflicts (Nasr, 2006). In Saudi Arabia, reforms have sometimes alleviated sectarian pressure but also provoked backlash among traditional elites (Matthiesen, 2013). Bahrain has attempted limited political inclusion, yet sectarian undercurrents remain politically potent (Al Shehabi, 2019). Kuwait's parliamentary politics occasionally reflect sectarian alignment in coalition-building and opposition strategies (Wehrey, 2013). UAE and Oman exhibit comparatively lower sectarian tension due to demographic structures and inclusive governance practices (Potter, 2014). Migration patterns, particularly from South Asia, add complexity to sectarian and social dynamics (Zeineddin, 2025).

Sectarian strife also intersects with labor market inequalities and urban-rural disparities, exacerbating social friction (Wehrey, 2013). Maritime security concerns in the Persian Gulf have at times mirrored sectarian divides, particularly regarding Iran's influence (Nasr, 2006). Proxy conflicts in Yemen and Iraq are extensions of sectarianized power competition between regional states (Potter, 2014). The transnational dimension of sectarianism connects Gulf states to broader Middle Eastern political and religious networks (Nasr, 2006). Regional organizations like the GCC have limited capacity to address sectarian tensions due to divergent national priorities (Wehrey, 2013). Scholars advocate for addressing underlying socioeconomic grievances alongside security concerns (Al Shehabi, 2019).

Political exclusion, discrimination, and lack of institutional channels for dissent fuel sectarian mobilization (Potter, 2014). Confidence-building initiatives, such as inclusive governance reforms, can mitigate sectarian tensions (Zeineddin, 2025). Track II diplomacy involving religious scholars and civil society actors has proven effective in reducing mistrust (Wehrey, 2013). Education reforms that promote pluralism can counteract sectarian narratives (Al Shehabi, 2019). Economic investment in marginalized areas reduces incentives for sectarian-based mobilization (Potter, 2014). External powers can support dialogue without exacerbating tensions by avoiding instrumentalization of sectarian identities (Nasr, 2006).

Joint cultural, academic, and professional exchanges foster mutual understanding across communities (Zeineddin, 2025). Monitoring and transparent governance reduce perceptions of discrimination and favoritism (Wehrey, 2013). Media regulation and promotion of moderate religious discourse can limit inflammatory rhetoric (Matthiesen, 2013).

Political reforms that include minority representation enhance legitimacy and social cohesion (Al Shehabi, 2019). Inclusive economic planning addresses both developmental and sectarian dimensions of inequality (Potter, 2014). Early-warning mechanisms and community-level engagement prevent escalation of local disputes (Zeineddin, 2025). Legal protections for religious minorities safeguard rights and reduce grievances (Wehrey, 2013). Building cross-sectarian coalitions in civil society strengthens social resilience (Potter, 2014). Engagement with local leaders ensures policy legitimacy and compliance (Nasr, 2006). A combination of domestic reform, regional diplomacy, and international support creates a comprehensive approach to managing sectarian strife (Al Shehabi, 2019). Addressing sectarianism requires a long-term, multifaceted strategy that integrates social, political, and economic dimensions (Wehrey, 2013; Nasr, 2006).

Figure

The infographic organizes sectarian strife in the Persian Gulf into three key domains: drivers, actors, and policy solutions. The Drivers of Sectarian Strife section highlights historical, political, and economic sources of tension, including colonial legacies, state-building processes, economic disparities, and media narratives. Sectarianism is amplified by regional rivalries, particularly between Iran and Sunni-dominated Gulf monarchies, reflecting both ideological and strategic competition. The Key Actors segment identifies Sunni monarchies, Shia communities, and external states such as Iran, alongside institutional actors like the GCC, showing how domestic and transnational forces intersect. Visual arrows indicate dynamic interactions between these drivers and actors, illustrating feedback loops where marginalization and political exclusion reinforce sectarian tensions. The Policy Solutions section outlines

mechanisms to mitigate conflict, including inclusive governance, economic investment, education reform, Track II diplomacy, media regulation, legal protections, and cross-community exchanges. Icons and color coding differentiate structural causes from human and institutional actors, enhancing clarity for academic audiences. Embedded scholarly references provide evidentiary grounding, linking each factor and solution to established research in the field. The infographic emphasizes the necessity of a multifaceted approach, showing that social, political, economic, and regional interventions must operate in concert to reduce sectarian strife. Overall, it functions as both a diagnostic map of sectarian dynamics and a prescriptive guide for policymakers and scholars seeking to understand and address persistent tensions in the Persian Gulf.

Inclusive Governance and Political Participation

Develop comprehensive frameworks that ensure proportional representation of Shia and other minority groups in legislative bodies, executive councils, and local governance structures. Promote mechanisms for participatory decision-making, including consultative forums, advisory councils, and civic councils, allowing communities to articulate grievances and influence policymaking. Encourage transparent electoral processes, equitable appointment systems, and constitutional reforms that codify minority rights, thereby strengthening state legitimacy and reducing the perception of systemic exclusion. Integrate monitoring systems to track the effectiveness of inclusion policies and ensure that political representation translates into real decision-making power rather than symbolic appointments. Facilitate inter-sectarian dialogue within institutions to cultivate shared norms, prevent sectarian bias in policymaking, and promote cross-communal collaboration on governance priorities.

Economic Development and Investment in Marginalized Areas

Launch targeted development programs in historically marginalized Shia-majority regions, including the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and Shia-populated areas in Bahrain and Kuwait. Invest in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and vocational training to address socio-economic disparities that exacerbate sectarian tensions. Promote local entrepreneurship, microfinance, and public-private partnerships to create sustainable employment opportunities and reduce dependency on state patronage. Introduce social protection programs and community-driven development initiatives that prioritize local needs and foster economic empowerment. Ensure transparency and accountability in resource allocation to prevent perceptions of favoritism or corruption, which can inflame sectarian grievances. Coordinate development initiatives with regional and international organizations to ensure best practices and maximize social impact.

Track II Diplomacy and Religious Dialogue

Establish robust informal diplomatic channels that bring together religious scholars, clerics, civil society actors, and community leaders from Sunni and Shia backgrounds. Facilitate sustained dialogue platforms to build trust, clarify misconceptions, and collaboratively address shared challenges. Incorporate neutral third-party mediators, including international organizations or respected academic institutions, to ensure impartiality and credibility. Promote thematic workshops on conflict resolution, interfaith understanding, and regional cooperation

to deepen mutual comprehension of historical, theological, and political contexts. Encourage the dissemination of outcomes from dialogue initiatives through publications, joint statements, and public awareness campaigns to foster broader societal engagement. Evaluate the effectiveness of Track II initiatives and scale successful models across multiple Gulf states to institutionalize peacebuilding mechanisms.

Education Reform for Pluralism

Revise curricula at all levels of schooling to include comprehensive coverage of religious diversity, civic education, and critical thinking. Develop programs that teach the historical, cultural, and social contributions of Sunni, Shia, and other minority communities, reducing stereotypes and promoting empathy. Train educators to facilitate inclusive classroom discussions, mediate disputes, and recognize the role of sectarian narratives in shaping societal attitudes. Introduce extracurricular programs, debates, and cultural exchanges that encourage cross-sectarian engagement and collaboration. Partner with universities and think tanks to integrate pluralism studies into higher education and professional development programs for future leaders. Leverage technology and media to provide interactive, engaging, and accessible educational content promoting tolerance and shared civic identity.

Media Regulation and Promotion of Moderate Discourse

Implement comprehensive frameworks that encourage responsible journalism, media literacy, and balanced reporting on sectarian issues. Monitor and counteract inflammatory content, disinformation, and sectarian propaganda through regulatory agencies and fact-checking initiatives. Encourage the production of media content—news, documentaries, and entertainment—that emphasizes shared values, national unity, and constructive engagement. Promote partnerships between state, private, and civil society media organizations to foster consistency in messaging and amplify voices of moderation. Support the training of journalists and media professionals in conflict-sensitive reporting, cross-cultural communication, and ethical standards. Leverage social media campaigns to reach younger demographics with positive narratives that bridge sectarian divides and highlight common societal goals.

Legal Protections and Minority Rights

Enact robust legislation guaranteeing the protection of religious, cultural, and political rights for minority communities. Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor implementation, investigate violations, and enforce accountability for discriminatory practices. Promote equal access to justice by training legal professionals and ensuring judicial impartiality, particularly in regions with pronounced sectarian tensions. Integrate anti-discrimination clauses into employment, education, and public service sectors to prevent systemic bias. Support the development of public awareness programs to inform communities of their legal rights and avenues for redress. Encourage collaboration with regional and international human rights organizations to benchmark standards and provide credibility to reforms.

Cross-Community Engagement Programs

Design and implement joint initiatives that bring Sunni and Shia communities together in cultural, academic, social, and professional contexts. Organize forums, workshops, sporting

events, and collaborative projects that encourage shared experiences and interpersonal trust. Facilitate academic research partnerships and professional exchanges across sectarian lines to promote dialogue among future leaders and policy influencers. Support community-based programs that encourage cooperative problem-solving, shared local governance, and neighborhood-level collaboration. Highlight successful cross-community initiatives through media and public recognition to create positive role models and replicate best practices. Embed monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure the impact of engagement programs on attitudes, trust, and social cohesion.

Monitoring, Transparency, and Early Warning Systems

Develop multi-level monitoring frameworks that detect early signs of sectarian tension, such as economic disparity, political exclusion, or inflammatory discourse. Utilize data analytics, surveys, and community reporting mechanisms to track grievances, identify hotspots, and prioritize interventions. Promote transparency in governance, resource allocation, and institutional decision-making to reduce perceptions of bias or favoritism. Establish rapid-response teams and coordination channels between government, civil society, and religious actors to prevent escalation of localized disputes. Integrate early-warning insights into policy planning, ensuring that interventions are proactive rather than reactive. Regularly review and refine monitoring systems to incorporate lessons learned, evolving social dynamics, and emerging risks.

Labor-Migrant Imbalances

Labor migration is a defining feature of the Persian Gulf economies, with expatriates forming a majority of the workforce in most GCC countries (Kamrava & Babar, 2012). The heavy reliance on foreign labor creates demographic imbalances, where migrant populations vastly outnumber local citizens in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and service industries (Rajan & Oommen, 2020). Scholars note that this imbalance generates structural dependencies, both economically and socially, for the host states (Naufal & Genc, 2012). Recruitment systems are often shaped by informal networks and labor brokers, which can lead to exploitative practices and pre-departure debt burdens (Alowais & Suliman, 2025). Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to debt bondage, as recruitment fees and loans are frequently imposed without legal safeguards (Sönmez et al., 2011).

Gender dynamics intersect with labor migration, as women migrants disproportionately occupy domestic roles with limited legal protections (Rajan & Balan, 2026). Babar (2017) emphasizes that migrant labor is central to the functioning of Gulf economies but simultaneously marginalized politically and socially. Health disparities are prevalent among low-income migrants due to inadequate healthcare access, poor living conditions, and long working hours (Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2014). Migrant laborers often live in segregated housing and under restricted mobility, reflecting structural inequalities (Kamrava & Babar, 2012). Legal frameworks in most Gulf states tie workers to their employers through sponsorship (kafala) systems, restricting freedom of movement and labor rights (Zherlitsina, 2024). Scholars argue that the kafala system institutionalizes imbalances of power, leaving workers dependent on their sponsors for visas, employment, and residency (Rajan & Oommen, 2020). The economic contributions of migrants, particularly through remittances, are critical for both sending and

host countries, yet migrants rarely share in long-term social benefits (Wagle, 2024). Social hierarchies among migrant communities often mirror nationality and skill level, with South and Southeast Asian workers concentrated in low-wage sectors (Rajan & Oommen, 2020).

Migrant workers' vulnerability is exacerbated by weak enforcement of labor laws and limited access to dispute resolution mechanisms (Sönmez et al., 2011). Scholars highlight that the lack of citizenship and political voice reinforces structural marginalization and inequality (Babar, 2017). Recruitment practices often exploit familial or community networks in sending countries, creating cycles of dependency and debt (Alowais & Suliman, 2025). Migration also produces socio-cultural tensions, as large migrant populations can disrupt local social cohesion and labor market expectations (Naufal & Genc, 2012). Policymakers in the Gulf have sought to address imbalances through nationalization programs such as Saudization or Emiratization, yet these initiatives often have limited effectiveness (Kamrava & Babar, 2012). Structural reforms are hindered by the entrenched economic reliance on inexpensive migrant labor (Rajan & Balan, 2026). Gendered inequalities are reinforced in sectors with high concentrations of female labor, where legal protections are weaker and social oversight is minimal (Rajan & Balan, 2026). Migrant labor research emphasizes the intersection of economic, legal, and social vulnerabilities, creating a multidimensional framework for understanding imbalance (Babar, 2017). Cross-national comparisons reveal that Qatar and the UAE have invested in labor reforms, yet enforcement gaps persist (Ewers, Diop, & Duma, 2023).

Figure Phillipino Careworkers

Health and safety regulations are inconsistently applied, particularly in construction and domestic work, contributing to mortality and injury risks (Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2014). Remittance dependency in sending countries influences the sustainability of migration flows and shapes economic policies abroad (Wagle, 2024). Informal labor markets exacerbate inequality, as workers in irregular employment face limited legal protections and precarious livelihoods (Zherlitsina, 2024). Scholars advocate for social protection systems that include migrant workers to reduce vulnerability and improve wellbeing (ILO & Partners, 2023). Economic segmentation in the Gulf ensures that low-wage migrants remain excluded from upward mobility and citizenship pathways (Rajan & Oommen, 2020). Migrant networks can provide social support, yet they also reinforce hierarchies and perpetuate labor exploitation

(Babar, 2017). Policy analysis indicates that structural reform requires coordination between sending and host countries to regulate recruitment fees, contracts, and labor rights (Alowais & Suliman, 2025).

Multi-dimensional interventions addressing health, housing, legal protection, and labor inspection are critical to balancing inequalities (Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2014). Scholars underscore the need for gender-sensitive approaches that recognize women's specific vulnerabilities in domestic and service work (Rajan & Balan, 2026). The Gulf labor system reflects a tension between economic imperatives and social justice, necessitating comprehensive policy frameworks (Kamrava & Babar, 2012). Advocacy and international monitoring play a role in pressuring Gulf states to adopt reforms, including minimum wage, contractual protections, and grievance mechanisms (Sönmez et al., 2011). Technology and data-driven labor oversight can help track abuses and promote accountability (Ewers, Diop, & Duma, 2023). Structural dependency on foreign labor continues to shape urban planning, housing policy, and labor market regulation (Naufal & Genc, 2012). Migration research emphasizes both the economic necessity and social vulnerability of labor flows in the Gulf, highlighting persistent imbalances and areas for intervention (Wagle, 2024). Legal reforms combined with social protections and inclusive policy frameworks are necessary to create sustainable, equitable labor systems (ILO & Partners, 2023). Finally, scholars call for long-term strategies integrating labor rights, economic planning, and social integration to mitigate the systemic imbalances inherent in Gulf labor migration (Rajan & Oommen, 2020).

Policy Road Map

A policy road map that integrates economic, social, and legal interventions, prioritizes transparency, and balances short-term relief with long-term structural reform. It is designed to be practical, evidence-based, and regionally coordinated:

1. Labor Market Assessment and Data Modernization

Decision-makers: GCC Ministries of Labor, national statistics offices, ILO regional offices

Timeline: 6–12 months

Targets: Complete a comprehensive labor census detailing nationality, sector, wages, and skill levels; identify gaps and over-reliance on specific migrant groups

Budget: $3–5 million per country (data collection, IT systems, analytics platforms)

Description: Establish a central, digital labor database to monitor workforce composition and project future labor demand. This enables evidence-based policy, anticipates sectoral shortages, and reduces over-dependence on specific migrant groups.

2. Recruitment Regulation and Debt Mitigation

Decision-makers: Ministries of Labor, embassies of sending countries, recruitment authorities

Timeline: 12–24 months

Targets: Eliminate illegal recruitment fees; implement binding contracts; reduce migrant debt burden by 50%

Budget: $2–4 million per country (regulatory systems, monitoring, legal support)

Description: Introduce standardized contracts, regulate recruitment fees, and provide pre-departure education programs to prevent debt bondage and exploitative hiring practices.

3. Skill Development and Nationalization Programs

Decision-makers: Ministries of Labor, Ministries of Education, private sector employers

Timeline: 3–5 years

Targets: Increase national workforce participation by 15–20% in key sectors; train 50,000–100,000 local workers per country

Budget: $200–300 million regionally (training centers, vocational programs, certification systems)

Description: Develop vocational and professional training for citizens while gradually reducing over-reliance on low-skill migrant labor. Incentivize private sector participation through subsidies or tax benefits.

4. Labor Rights Enforcement and Legal Protections

Decision-makers: Ministries of Labor, judicial bodies, labor inspectorates

Timeline: 1–3 years

Targets: Establish independent labor grievance mechanisms; enforce minimum wage and health standards; reduce labor disputes by 40%

Budget: $50–100 million regionally (inspectors, legal aid offices, enforcement campaigns)

Description: Strengthen inspection regimes, protect migrant workers from exploitation, and ensure accountability through transparent legal systems.

5. Housing and Living Standards Improvement

Decision-makers: Ministries of Labor, municipalities, private developers

Timeline: 2–4 years

Targets: Upgrade 80% of migrant worker accommodations to meet international standards; reduce overcrowding by 50%

Budget: $500 million–$1 billion regionally (housing construction, sanitation, utilities)

Description: Provide safe, affordable, and adequate housing for migrant workers, with oversight mechanisms for compliance with labor standards.

6. Health, Safety, and Social Protection Programs

Decision-makers: Ministries of Health, Ministries of Labor, ILO, NGOs

Timeline: 1–3 years

Targets: Ensure all migrant workers have access to basic healthcare; reduce work-related injuries by 30%

Budget: $150–250 million regionally (health insurance, occupational safety programs, clinics)

Description: Provide mandatory health coverage, occupational safety training, and emergency medical access for all migrant laborers.

7. Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue and Community Integration

Decision-makers: Ministries of Labor, civil society, employers' associations, migrant associations

Timeline: Ongoing, with annual evaluation

Targets: Conduct annual multi-stakeholder forums; establish community liaison offices in all GCC countries

Budget: $10–20 million annually (forums, workshops, mediation offices)

Description: Facilitate dialogue among governments, employers, and migrant communities to address grievances, integrate social services, and promote mutual understanding.

8. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Policy Feedback Loop

Decision-makers: GCC Secretariat, Ministries of Labor, independent research institutions

Timeline: 1–5 years (continuous)

Targets: Publish annual labor reports; achieve measurable reduction in structural labor imbalances within 5 years

Budget: $5–10 million annually (data collection, audits, reporting systems)

Description: Track progress across all interventions, identify bottlenecks, and adapt policies using data-driven insights. Establish key performance indicators for employment, rights protection, and social integration.

9. Youth Unemployment

The youth is open to the world, want to be taken seriously and to participate. Until the local elites have accepted this simple truth and acted on it, strife and repression will continue in the Persian Gulf countries.

In the Persian Gulf subregion, youth constitute a large and strategically critical demographic, shaping both economic potential and social stability. Across countries such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and Iran, youth (generally defined as ages 15–29) form between 20 and 30 percent of the population, with working-age cohorts even higher due to labor migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This concentration of youth carries both opportunities and risks: on one hand, it represents a potential demographic dividend if young people are skilled, employed, and socially engaged; on the other, high unemployment, skills mismatches, and limited avenues for participation can exacerbate social tensions, migration pressures, and political grievances.

The implications for public policy are multi-layered. Economically, policies must focus on education reform and skills training aligned with emerging sectors such as renewable energy, water management, digital technology, and sustainable urban development. Traditional public-sector employment alone cannot absorb the growing youth cohort, so fostering private-sector growth, entrepreneurship, and innovation hubs is essential. Countries like Saudi Arabia are already experimenting with youth-focused programs under Vision 2030, emphasizing STEM education, vocational training, and innovation incubators. Similarly, UAE has expanded technical colleges and scholarship schemes to prepare youth for a knowledge-based economy.

Figure Saudi Youth

Social and cultural policies must complement economic initiatives. Youth inclusion in civic and cultural life strengthens social cohesion and promotes tolerance in a region characterized by national diversity and expatriate populations. Programs that encourage cultural exchange, leadership development, volunteerism, and participation in community decision-making not only equip youth with skills but also cultivate a sense of agency and responsibility. Public investment in sports, arts, and cultural festivals serves both social and soft power purposes, fostering regional identity while enhancing cross-border understanding among Gulf states.

Demographically informed planning is also required. Governments must anticipate shifts in cohort size and dependency ratios over the next two decades. By integrating demographic data

into national strategies, authorities can align infrastructure, housing, healthcare, and education systems with projected youth populations. This planning is particularly urgent in Iran, where the youth share is gradually declining and the elderly population is rising, requiring simultaneous investment in older-age social support and retooling education to maximize remaining youth potential. In GCC countries, continued reliance on migrant labor makes domestic youth policies even more important, as local youth must be prepared to occupy high-value economic niches that expatriates currently fill.

Policy instruments must therefore be adaptive, multi-sectoral, and forward-looking. Fiscal incentives for private-sector hiring of young nationals, subsidies for technical and vocational education, public-private apprenticeship programs, and interregional youth networks all reinforce economic inclusion. Simultaneously, regulatory frameworks that promote social participation, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and cultural engagement ensure that youth development is holistic rather than narrowly employment-focused. The coordination of these policies across ministries of education, labor, culture, and finance is critical, and must also be harmonized with regional cooperation mechanisms to leverage shared learning and resource mobilization.

Figure Luri People

In summary the youth cohort in the Persian Gulf subregion represents both a potential engine of innovation and a source of social risk. Public policy must adapt proactively by investing in education and skills aligned with the post-oil economy, promoting social inclusion and cultural engagement, and integrating demographic foresight into economic and social planning. By doing so, the Gulf states can convert the demographic dividend into a sustained foundation for economic diversification, regional stability, and societal resilience.

In building a resilient and cooperative Persian Gulf region, youth engagement and cultural exchange are critical levers for long-term stability and prosperity. Investing in education and skills training for the region's youth is not merely a social policy; it is a strategic imperative. As Gulf economies gradually transition away from hydrocarbon dependency, young people must acquire the technical expertise, entrepreneurial skills, and adaptive capacities needed to thrive in a post-oil economy. This includes training in renewable energy technologies, water management and climate adaptation, digital innovation, and sustainable urban planning. Programs that integrate internships, mentorships, and cross-border industry placements can

accelerate skill transfer while fostering networks of Gulf citizens attuned to shared economic and environmental challenges. By positioning youth as co-creators of regional solutions, Gulf states can ensure that the next generation becomes both a reservoir of talent and a bridge across national divides.

Equally important are cultural exchange programs, which cultivate mutual understanding and trust among Gulf societies. Initiatives that promote student exchanges, inter-university collaborations, joint research projects, and regional art and heritage programs allow citizens to experience common histories, shared linguistic traditions, and overlapping cultural practices.

Such interactions can reduce stereotypes, strengthen social cohesion, and encourage collaborative problem-solving across borders. Cultural diplomacy also complements technical cooperation, creating informal channels of dialogue that persist even during political tensions.

Figure Yemeni boy, Socotra

For instance, joint scientific festivals, regional youth leadership conferences, and collaborative media projects can normalize cross-border collaboration while reinforcing a shared Gulf identity.

As expected, Gulf countries like UAE and Qatar have very high working-age shares due to labor migration, while Iran has a slightly larger youth cohort and rising elderly population.

Together, youth engagement and cultural exchange serve as pillars of a multi-dimensional strategy: they enhance human capital, nurture social cohesion, and lay the societal foundations for broader regional cooperation. When embedded alongside technical and policy-driven initiatives—such as water management, renewable energy, and climate resilience—these programs help ensure that regional integration is not only institutional but also societal, giving the Persian Gulf a durable and forward-looking framework for security and development.

Table Youth Enployment in the Persian Gulf

Country	~2000 (est.)	~2010 (est.)	~2020 (est.)	2023/24	2025 Trend*	Implications
Iran	~20–25% (est)**	~25–30% (est)	~25–28%	~22.6% (2023)	Gradual decline if economy stabilizes	High long-term youth unemployment

						slows growth, fuels emigration, underutilizes workforce
Iraq	~30–35% (est)**	~30–35% (est)	~30–33%	~32.0% (2023)	Persistent high levels	Largest youth unemployment among these, linked with conflict, weak private sector
Saudi Arabia	~15–25% (est)**	~15–30% (est)	~20–28% (2020 estimates)	~13.8% (2024)	Declining with Vision 2030 reforms	Reforms improving job creation but structural mismatches persist
United Arab Emirates	~10–15% (est)**	~8–12% (est)	~7–10% (2020s)	~6.47% (2023)	Relatively low	Strong public sector and expatriate market keep rates low
Bahrain	~15–25% (est)**	~10–20% (est)	~7–9% (2020s)	~5.52% (2023)	Moderately low	Small domestic labor market, some diversification success
Qatar	~5–10% (est)**	~2–8% (est)	~<5%	~0.57% (2023)	Exceptionally low	Small youth population, strong public employment

Youth unemployment remains a major economic and social challenge in the Middle East. Iraq and Iran face the highest rates, reflecting post-conflict instability, weak private sectors, and slow job creation. High youth unemployment in these countries contributes to social unrest, migration pressures, and underutilization of human capital. GCC states generally have lower youth unemployment, largely due to public sector absorption and reliance on expatriate labor.

However, even in the GCC, structural issues persist, including skills mismatches and limited private-sector opportunities for nationals. Demographic pressures exacerbate the problem, as labor supply grows faster than job creation. Low unemployment in some Gulf states can mask low labor force participation, especially among women. Economic diversification, entrepreneurship, and targeted education reforms are essential to sustainably reduce youth unemployment. Labor market policies must balance public sector employment, private sector growth, and workforce participation to maximize youth engagement. Overall, addressing youth unemployment is critical for long-term stability, economic growth, and regional competitiveness.

Plan of Economic Diversification

To address the challenges of large youth cohorts the Gulfis will need economic diversification that comes down to several elements:

Reducing Oil Dependence

At the core of economic diversification theory is the imperative to systematically reduce reliance on hydrocarbon revenues, which historically dominate GDP, government spending, and export earnings in Gulf economies. Theoretical models emphasize the vulnerability of oil-dependent states to global price fluctuations, geopolitical shocks, and long-term depletion risks. Diversification entails deliberate shifts toward multiple productive sectors, ensuring that government budgets, public services, and national development plans are not contingent on energy rents. Hvidt (2013) argues that this requires a combination of fiscal reforms, sovereign wealth fund management, and the creation of alternative revenue streams, which can sustain public spending during periods of oil volatility. In theory, reducing oil dependence also strengthens political and social stability, as resource scarcity is less likely to trigger public discontent or policy crises.

Sectoral Expansion

A fundamental element of diversification involves strategically expanding into non-oil sectors such as finance, logistics, manufacturing, tourism, renewable energy, and knowledge-based industries. This sectoral broadening aims to create a balanced economic portfolio that distributes risk and increases resilience to external shocks (Kamrava, 2014). The theoretical framework emphasizes identifying comparative advantages, leveraging geographic location, natural resources, or human capital, and ensuring that emerging sectors can generate employment, foster innovation, and integrate into global value chains. By simultaneously nurturing multiple sectors, diversification reduces dependence on a single commodity while catalyzing private-sector growth, trade linkages, and industrial development.

Human Capital Development

Theories of diversification emphasize that human capital is the linchpin of sustainable economic transformation. Education reform, vocational training, professional development, and skill-building programs equip citizens to enter knowledge-intensive and high-productivity sectors (Rajan & Balan, 2026). This dimension is critical in Gulf states where low oil-dependence sectors traditionally rely on expatriate labor, creating a mismatch between available nationals and emerging employment opportunities. By investing in human capital, states theoretically achieve a dual objective: enhancing competitiveness in global markets while simultaneously reducing structural dependency on foreign labor. Human capital development also underpins entrepreneurship, innovation, and adaptive capacity, which are vital for resilience in rapidly evolving economic landscapes.

Institutional Reform and Governance

Strong, transparent, and efficient institutions are a prerequisite for diversification. The theoretical perspective stresses that regulatory frameworks, property rights, contract enforcement, and investment facilitation are essential to foster entrepreneurship, attract foreign direct investment, and support sustainable non-oil sector growth (Al-Saleh, 2018). Institutional reform includes streamlining bureaucratic procedures, improving public-sector efficiency, and implementing accountability mechanisms to reduce corruption and enhance investor confidence. Governance reforms also ensure equitable resource allocation and create

predictable policy environments, which are critical for long-term private-sector engagement and the success of diversified economic portfolios.

Innovation and Technology Adoption

Innovation and technological advancement are central to theoretical models of diversification, enabling economies to move from low-value production toward high-value, knowledge-based industries (Hvidt, 2013). This requires strategic investment in research and development, the creation of innovation hubs, and the integration of technology into manufacturing, services, and energy sectors. Theoretical approaches also emphasize the importance of fostering entrepreneurship, intellectual property protection, and technology transfer, which collectively drive productivity, enhance global competitiveness, and create sustainable employment opportunities. Diversification without innovation risks stagnation in low-value sectors and failure to achieve long-term structural transformation.

Economic Liberalization

Diversification theory posits that liberal economic policies are critical for enabling market-driven growth in non-oil sectors. Trade openness, reduced regulatory barriers, targeted investment incentives, and public-private partnerships stimulate enterprise development and enhance the efficiency of domestic markets. Liberalization encourages domestic and foreign investors to participate in emerging sectors, facilitating the flow of capital, knowledge, and expertise. By integrating market-based mechanisms with strategic state support, liberalization theoretically accelerates the emergence of a diversified and competitive economic structure.

Macroeconomic Stability

Fiscal prudence, sound monetary management, and sovereign wealth accumulation constitute another essential theoretical element. Maintaining macroeconomic stability ensures that public resources are available to finance diversification initiatives over the long term, particularly during periods of oil price volatility. Exchange rate management, inflation control, and sustainable debt policies are necessary to protect investments in emerging sectors. Macroeconomic stability also fosters investor confidence, reduces systemic risk, and ensures that diversification policies are not derailed by short-term economic shocks or fiscal crises.

Regional and Global Integration

Theoretical models emphasize that diversification cannot occur in isolation; linkages to regional and global economic networks are critical for sustainability. By connecting domestic markets to international supply chains, trade networks, and regional economic blocs, states can access new markets, attract foreign investment, and leverage knowledge spillovers. Integration also enhances resilience against external shocks, allowing economies to adapt to changing global demand, technological trends, and competitive pressures. Strategic global positioning, therefore, amplifies the impact of domestic diversification policies and accelerates the transition to a balanced, knowledge-intensive economic structure.

Applied to the Persian Gulf empirically

Economic diversification in the Persian Gulf is a strategic necessity, driven by the recognition that hydrocarbon dependence exposes states to volatile oil prices, global energy transitions, and long-term economic vulnerability. Theoretically, diversification requires a fundamental reconfiguration of the economy, shifting from a mono-commodity reliance toward a multifaceted economic structure in which multiple productive sectors contribute substantially to GDP, government revenue, and employment. This shift encompasses sectoral expansion into finance, tourism, logistics, high-value manufacturing, renewable energy, and knowledge-intensive industries, ensuring resilience against external shocks and fostering sustainable growth. A critical element of theoretical diversification is human capital development, whereby education systems, vocational training programs, and professional development pathways equip citizens with the skills to participate effectively in non-oil sectors, thus aligning labor supply with evolving economic needs. Institutional reform and governance play a foundational role, as transparent regulatory frameworks, strong property rights, investment facilitation, and bureaucratic efficiency are necessary to attract domestic and foreign investment and to sustain innovation-driven growth. Innovation and technology adoption constitute another central pillar of the theoretical model, requiring systematic investment in research and development, incubation of entrepreneurial ecosystems, and strategic promotion of high-value sectors, enabling the economy to transition from low-skill production to technologically advanced industries. Economic liberalization complements these measures by encouraging trade openness, facilitating foreign direct investment, incentivizing public-private partnerships, and reducing regulatory barriers to enterprise, thereby fostering competitive and diversified markets. Maintaining macroeconomic stability through prudent fiscal policies, effective exchange rate management, and the strategic use of sovereign wealth funds provides the financial foundation for long-term diversification investments. Regional and global integration further enhances the theoretical framework, linking domestic economies to global supply chains, international trade networks, and knowledge economies, which amplifies growth opportunities and resilience.

In practical terms, the Persian Gulf states have approached diversification with varying degrees of success, shaped by domestic conditions, institutional capacities, and resource endowments. Saudi Arabia has articulated an ambitious strategy under Vision 2030, seeking to expand renewable energy, tourism, non-oil manufacturing, and technology-driven sectors while privatizing key industries and promoting foreign investment. The practical challenge for Saudi Arabia lies in balancing the rapid transformation of labor markets with the employment expectations of its large youth population and integrating nationals into sectors historically dominated by expatriates. The United Arab Emirates, particularly Dubai and Abu Dhabi, exemplifies early and effective diversification, leveraging free zones, strategic geographic positioning, liberal regulatory regimes, and investment in finance, aviation, tourism, and logistics.

UAE's diversification success is reflected in reduced sensitivity to oil price fluctuations, though Abu Dhabi's continued reliance on hydrocarbons underscores that diversification remains partial. Qatar has invested heavily in LNG, finance, knowledge sectors, and flagship initiatives such as Education City, aiming to develop a knowledge-based economy; however, limited population size and high dependence on migrant labor constrain the scalability and inclusivity of diversification outcomes. Kuwait has undertaken incremental diversification through financial services and selective industrial projects, yet entrenched political structures, reliance

on the public sector, and social pressures slow the transition from oil dependence. Oman's Vision Oman 2040 emphasizes tourism, logistics, fisheries, and small- and medium-sized enterprises, but practical implementation is hampered by limited investment capacity, institutional rigidity, and small domestic markets. Bahrain's small size and early recognition of oil limitations have prompted diversification into finance, ICT, and small-scale manufacturing, yielding moderate success, though structural economic limitations restrict large-scale transformation. Comparative evaluation reveals that early liberalization, institutional capacity, and geographic advantages have enabled UAE and Bahrain to achieve more practical diversification, whereas Saudi Arabia and Qatar pursue large-scale strategic frameworks with longer-term horizons. Oman and Kuwait illustrate how political, institutional, and demographic constraints can limit the practical realization of theoretical diversification models. A critical insight is that successful economic diversification requires integrated approaches encompassing human capital development, legal and institutional reform, technological innovation, labor market integration, macroeconomic stability, and global economic connectivity. Cross-country learning within the GCC offers opportunities for policy transfer, particularly in labor market reform, investment facilitation, and knowledge sector development. Ultimately, diversification is a multi-dimensional, long-term process that must reconcile economic imperatives with social inclusion, political realities, and sustainable development imperatives.

Comparative Table: Economic Diversification in the Persian Gulf

GCC Country	Theoretical Focus	Practical Implementation	Strengths	Limitations / Challenges
Saudi Arabia	Vision 2030; renewable energy, tourism, non-oil manufacturing, human capital development	Privatization, foreign investment incentives, youth employment programs	Large domestic market, strategic planning, resource capacity	Slow national labor absorption, dependency on foreign expertise, social adaptation challenges
UAE	Sectoral expansion in finance, aviation, tourism, logistics, innovation	Free zones, liberal regulations, strategic geography, early investment in knowledge economy	Diversified economic portfolio, reduced oil sensitivity, global connectivity	Abu Dhabi oil dependence remains; reliance on migrant labor for operational sectors
Qatar	Knowledge economy, finance, LNG, education and R&D	Education City, infrastructure projects, investment in financial and tech sectors	High investment in knowledge-based growth, small scale enables concentrated projects	Small labor pool, high reliance on expatriates, limited domestic workforce integration
Kuwait	Financial services, selective industry diversification	Incremental reform in banking and industry	Strong institutional governance, stable public sector	Political constraints, oil dependency, slow structural transformation

Oman	Tourism, logistics, fisheries, SMEs	Vision Oman 2040 initiatives	Strategic geographic position, natural resources, policy clarity	Limited investment capacity, institutional rigidity, small market size
Bahrain	Finance, ICT, small-scale manufacturing	Early diversification, economic openness	Small scale allows rapid adaptation, early reform experience	Structural limitations, limited growth potential, high reliance on financial sector

IMPLCATIONS

The youth parliament of the GCC envisions a comprehensive strategy to drive economic diversification, emphasizing youth empowerment, sustainable growth, and social equity. Reducing oil dependence is a central priority, requiring the development of renewable energy projects, green industries, and energy-efficiency initiatives across the Gulf. Ministries of Energy and Economy, in partnership with universities and youth innovation councils, are tasked with implementing pilot programs and incubators over a three-year timeline. Youth engagement is embedded through innovation competitions, startup grants, and consultation forums, ensuring young voices influence policy design and execution.

Sectoral expansion into finance, tourism, logistics, ICT, creative industries, and biotechnology is the next critical step. Ministries of Trade and Industry, in coordination with private-sector associations, will launch internships, apprenticeships, and youth mentorship schemes within 2–5 years, targeting measurable employment outcomes for young nationals. Startups and SMEs led by youth will receive tax incentives, workspace support, and access to public-private investment pools, creating pathways for entrepreneurial participation.

Human capital development underpins all diversification efforts, focusing on aligning education with market needs. Ministries of Education, higher-education institutions, and vocational centers will redesign curricula to include STEM, digital literacy, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship, with a phased rollout over five years. Youth engagement occurs through leadership programs, university-industry partnerships, and scholarship opportunities, enabling young nationals to acquire the skills necessary for high-value sectors.

Institutional reform and governance aim to enhance transparency, inclusivity, and participatory policymaking. Ministries of Governance and Labor, along with youth advisory councils, will oversee digitalization of public services, streamlining business registration, and monitoring diversification projects. Within three years, the introduction of youth-led oversight panels will ensure accountability and empower young citizens to track government spending, labor policies, and entrepreneurship support programs.

Innovation and technology adoption are critical for sustaining diversification. Ministries of Science, Technology, and Innovation, working with research institutions, will establish national innovation hubs, startup accelerators, and R&D funding programs over a four-year horizon. Youth are directly engaged as founders, researchers, and policy advisors, with access to mentorship, grants, and global knowledge networks. Special emphasis is placed on

integrating technology into traditional sectors, such as agriculture, logistics, and manufacturing, to increase productivity and create high-skill jobs for young nationals.

Economic liberalization complements diversification, creating a regulatory and investment environment conducive to youth entrepreneurship. Ministries of Trade and Finance, in collaboration with free zone authorities, will implement simplified business registration, investment incentives, and flexible labor regulations within two years. Youth-led ventures will be prioritized in public-private partnerships, and regional investment matchmaking programs will facilitate access to capital and mentorship.

Maintaining macroeconomic stability is essential to sustain diversification and youth employment. Ministries of Finance and Central Banks will adopt transparent fiscal management practices, strategically allocate sovereign wealth fund resources, and implement contingency plans to mitigate oil price shocks over the next five years. Youth-focused financial literacy initiatives will enhance civic understanding of macroeconomic policies, enabling young nationals to participate in decision-making processes and economic planning.

Regional and global integration ensures that GCC youth benefit from international opportunities and best practices. Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Education, in collaboration with youth councils, will launch cross-border exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and regional innovation forums over a 3–5-year timeframe. These programs facilitate knowledge sharing, labor mobility, and international entrepreneurship exposure, allowing young professionals to connect domestic diversification efforts with global markets.

This youth-centered framework emphasizes a cohesive, multi-layered approach where every policy domain integrates concrete actions, clearly defined responsible actors, structured timelines, and mechanisms for youth engagement. By embedding young nationals in planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation, the GCC can ensure that economic diversification not only strengthens the economy but also fosters social inclusion, innovation, and generational empowerment. The resulting strategy balances long-term economic resilience with immediate opportunities for youth participation, skill acquisition, and leadership in shaping the Gulf's post-oil future.

Table

Dimension	GCC-Level Tasks	State-Level Assignments	Responsible Actors	Timeline	Youth Engagement Mechanisms
Reducing Oil Dependence	Develop regional renewable energy standards, share best practices, coordinate green investment funds	Implement pilot renewable energy projects, green technology zones, and energy-efficiency programs	Ministries of Energy, Economy, Youth Innovation Councils	3 years	Innovation competitions, youth advisory panels, startup grants
Sectoral Expansion	Identify emerging	Launch national	Ministries of Trade,	2–5 years	Internships, apprenticeships,

	industries across GCC; coordinate cross-border trade and SME networks	sectoral programs in finance, tourism, logistics, ICT, creative industries	Industry, Private Sector Associations		mentorship programs, youth entrepreneurship incentives
Human Capital Development	Standardize GCC vocational and skill programs; facilitate regional scholarships	Revise curricula, establish university-industry partnerships, create vocational centers	Ministries of Education, Higher Education, Vocational Training Authorities	5 years	Leadership programs, internships, skill certification, scholarship access
Institutional Reform & Governance	Promote GCC-wide digital governance best practices; harmonize transparency measures	Digitalize public services, streamline business registration, implement youth monitoring panels	Ministries of Governance, Labor, Youth Advisory Councils	3 years	Youth-led oversight panels, policy consultation forums, civic engagement workshops
Innovation & Technology	Create regional innovation networks, cross-border R&D consortia	Establish national innovation hubs, startup accelerators, technology funding programs	Ministries of Science, Technology, Innovation; Research Institutions	4 years	Youth-led startups, grants, mentorship, participation in R&D projects
Economic Liberalization	Harmonize investment regulations, encourage regional startup visas	Simplify business registration, provide investment incentives, enable flexible labor policies	Ministries of Trade, Finance, Free Zone Authorities	2 years	Priority support for youth ventures, public-private partnership participation, regional investment matchmaking
Macroeconomic Stability	Coordinate GCC fiscal prudence guidelines, sovereign wealth fund allocation	Implement transparent public spending, contingency planning, economic forecasting	Ministries of Finance, Central Banks	5 years	Youth financial literacy programs, inclusion in policy monitoring and advisory forums
Regional & Global Integration	Establish GCC youth exchange and innovation forums, regional	Facilitate cross-border internships, research collaborations,	Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Trade,	3–5 years	Cross-border youth exchanges, research projects,

	entrepreneurship networks	joint education programs	Youth Councils		international entrepreneurship exposure

This table consolidates the entire youth-led GCC roadmap, showing what needs to be done at the GCC level, the country-level assignments, which actors are responsible, expected timelines, and how youth are engaged in each step.

Summary

Sectarian strife in the Persian Gulf remains a pervasive societal fault line, rooted in uneven political inclusion and historical divisions between Sunni and Shia communities. Sectarian narratives are reinforced when access to economic and political capital is unequal across identities, contributing to grievances and social fragmentation. Gulf regimes have, at times, viewed demands for reform by Shia minorities as security threats, which deepens mistrust and marginalization.

Sectarian tensions are not only religious but also tied to state bureaucracies, labor markets, and legal systems where Shia communities often lack equal representation and opportunities. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, visible economic disparities between Shia and Sunni areas have amplified discontent. The kafala migrant sponsorship system dominates Gulf labor markets and creates deep imbalances, as migrant workers are legally bound to employers, limiting mobility and exposing them to exploitation. These structural labor arrangements have resulted in vast populations of low paid foreign workers in construction, domestic work, and service sectors—many living in poor conditions with limited labor rights. Migrants from South Asia and elsewhere often face withheld wages, unsafe workplaces, and little recourse to justice, reflecting systemic labor inequalities.

The demographic composition of Gulf states—with migrants outnumbering citizens in many cases—fuels social stratification and complicates cohesive nation building. Efforts by GCC states to nationalize workforces—through Saudization, Emiratization, and similar policies—have had limited success and sometimes heightened competition between locals and migrants for scarce private sector jobs. Youth unemployment is a chronic challenge across the region, as large young populations enter labor markets that cannot absorb them, driving frustration and social pressure. In Iran, youth unemployment is acute and carries an "over education" dimension: university graduates often lack jobs matching their skills, with educated youth facing unemployment rates above national averages in the Gulf. This mismatch contributes to political dissatisfaction and periodic social unrest. In Iraq, persistent high youth unemployment, estimated by some measures to be much higher than official figures, has been a catalyst for protests and political mobilization.

Iraqi youth have been at the forefront of mass protests (such as the Tishreen movement) demanding accountability, better services, and jobs, reflecting deep frustrations with economic mismanagement and corruption. Sectarian divisions in Iraq—stemming from historical Sunni disenfranchisement and post 2003 restructuring—continue to shape politics and social cohesion. Both Iran and Iraq face the dual challenge of creating hundreds of thousands of jobs annually to meet youth labor market demand, a daunting task given fiscal and structural economic constraints. Migrant labor dynamics in the wider Gulf region complicate these

tensions, as local job shortages intersect with imported labor forces, exacerbating perceptions of inequality and exclusion. Gulf states' reliance on foreign workers to sustain large infrastructure, service, and construction sectors has created a two tiered social order that can fuel resentment among unemployed or under employed nationals. Youth unemployment combined with limited social mobility contributes to periodic protests and demands for reform across the region. Addressing these societal pressures requires policies that combine economic diversification, labor reform, protection of migrant rights, and inclusive political participation to reduce feelings of marginalization. Overall, the "temperature" in Iraq and Iran reflects both overlapping and distinct pressures: Iraq's youth and sectarian politics are deeply entangled with governance failures and identity politics, while Iran's youth unemployment is closely tied to economic stagnation and structural labor market mismatches.

HUMAN LEVEL ISSUES

10. Labour Exploitation

Migrant workers constitute a foundational element of the labor markets across the Persian Gulf and neighboring states, underpinning critical sectors such as construction, services, domestic work, logistics, and infrastructure. Among these workers, Indian expatriates represent the largest single group, forming substantial populations across the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Their labor spans both low-wage and professional sectors, encompassing construction, healthcare, education, engineering, retail, and specialized professional services. Bangladeshi workers constitute another significant cohort, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, primarily employed in construction, sanitation, transport, and domestic labor. Pakistani migrants are also prominent across the Gulf, with concentrations in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman, performing roles in construction, security, transportation, and clerical services. Filipino workers are notable for their participation in healthcare, education, and domestic work, primarily in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with many occupying relatively skilled positions compared to other migrant communities. Smaller but significant groups, including Nepali, Sri Lankan, and African migrants, populate construction and service sectors across the region, while internal regional migrants supplement labor markets in multiple Gulf states. In Iran, significant numbers of Pakistani, Afghan, and Iraqi migrants are employed in construction, agriculture, and service sectors, while Iraq hosts smaller numbers of Syrian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, and other Asian migrant workers, concentrated in urban service sectors and reconstruction activities.

Figure

Among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the UAE and Qatar demonstrate the highest levels of dependence on migrant labor, with expatriates often exceeding seventy to eighty percent of the population and dominating most non-public economic sectors. Saudi Arabia also relies heavily on foreign labor in infrastructure, energy, and services, though the larger citizen population reduces relative dependence. Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman maintain substantial foreign workforces, with migrants providing critical labor in construction, services, and finance. Iran relies on migrant labor less intensively, though border regions and urban centers feature substantial Pakistani, Afghan, and Iraqi communities engaged in construction, services, and agriculture. Iraq has a smaller migrant labor presence, reflecting political instability, security concerns, and limited labor market capacity, with Syrian, Egyptian, and Bangladeshi migrants predominantly in urban services and reconstruction roles.

Legal protections for migrant workers in the region are uneven, reflecting a combination of domestic legislation and international treaty obligations. Most Gulf states provide employment contracts outlining wages, durations, and work responsibilities, yet enforcement mechanisms are limited. The kafala system, prevalent in Gulf countries, ties residency to employer sponsorship, restricting mobility and access to justice. Minimum wage legislation and occupational safety requirements exist but are inconsistently applied. International legal instruments include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), guaranteeing fair and favorable work conditions and adequate living standards, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), which is rarely ratified by Gulf states. The ILO Core Conventions, including those on freedom of association, forced labor, and collective bargaining, provide important protections but are inconsistently enforced. Treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) offer protections particularly relevant for female migrants, though implementation remains variable. Iran and Iraq have ratified some treaties, including the ICCPR and CRC, but enforcement remains weak due to administrative limitations, informal labor markets, and limited institutional capacity.

Structural vulnerabilities for migrant workers include wage delays or non-payment, restricted mobility, inadequate housing, limited healthcare access, and lack of legal recourse. Enforcement weaknesses arise from weak labor inspection regimes, limited judicial independence, and absence of independent oversight bodies. The kafala system in particular exacerbates exploitation and dependency, creating structural barriers to justice and amplifying vulnerability to abuse. Iran and Iraq face similar issues, with informal labor markets, insufficient enforcement capacity, and administrative gaps limiting practical protection for migrant populations.

A targeted, multidimensional approach is necessary to address migrant worker vulnerabilities effectively. Legal reform should focus on abolishing or reforming the kafala sponsorship system to decouple residency from a single employer, codifying minimum labor standards for wages, hours, overtime pay, and compensation, and domestically implementing international treaties such as the ICRMW. Alignment with core ILO conventions, particularly on freedom of association and forced labor, is essential, while domestic labor codes in Iran and Iraq should be amended to guarantee parity of protection between migrants and citizens. Enforcement mechanisms should be strengthened by expanding labor inspectorates with independent

authority, establishing accessible complaint mechanisms, introducing wage protection systems, and creating ombudsman offices empowered to enforce compliance. Social protections must include mandatory health insurance covering work-related injuries, standardized housing inspections, and accessible legal aid and translation services. Dispute resolution requires specialized labor courts, expedited procedures, legal aid services, and culturally competent representation for non-native workers. Bilateral agreements between labor-sending states and host countries, pre-departure orientation programs, and joint monitoring mechanisms are crucial to ensure rights awareness and oversight. Civil society and worker representation must be supported through the legalization of worker councils or associations, empowerment of NGOs, and outreach programs educating workers on their rights.

Monitoring and evaluation are essential, including annual labor rights scorecards, independent assessments by research institutes and civil society, and sanctions for violations, such as fines or license suspensions. Enforcement should be data-driven, transparent, and accountable, integrating digital contracts, banking-based wage verification, and third-party oversight. Overall, the UAE and Qatar exhibit the highest dependency on migrant labor, followed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with Bahrain, Oman, Iran, and Iraq demonstrating moderate dependency. Despite formal treaty commitments and labor legislation, enforcement gaps, structural vulnerabilities, and lack of oversight persist across the region. A comprehensive, rights-based, and context-specific strategy integrating legal reform, enforcement, social protections, dispute resolution, bilateral cooperation, civil society support, and accountability mechanisms is necessary to ensure that migrant workers are protected not only in principle but in practice. Effective implementation requires sustained political will, institutional capacity building, and engagement with migrant communities, governments, and international actors to ensure durable and equitable labor protections across the region.

Table Migrant Workers

Country	Major Migrant Communities	Dependency Level	Domestic Legal Protections	International Instruments Ratified	Current Enforcement Gaps	Targeted Protection Strategies
Saudi Arabia	Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Filipino, Nepali	High; migrant workforce ~30–35% of total population; majority in construction, services, domestic labor	Labor law with employment contracts, kafala sponsorship system, wage & housing regulations, limited labor inspection	CRC, CERD, CEDAW (with reservations); not ICCPR, ICRMW	Kafala system restricts mobility; weak labor inspections; wage nonpayment; limited judicial oversight	Abolish/reform kafala; codify wage standards; strengthen inspection; establish ombudsman offices; enforce occupational safety; improve dispute resolution and legal aid
United Arab Emirat	Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi	Very high; expatriates ~88% of	Employment contracts; kafala	CRC, CERD, CEDAW	Over-reliance on employer sponsorship;	Introduce digital contracts;

es (UAE)	, Filipino, Sri Lankan, African	population; dominate construction, services, finance, domestic sectors	system; minimal unionization; limited labor court infrastructure	(with reservations); not ICCPR, ICRMW	limited worker representation; enforcement inconsistent	mandatory health insurance; enforce housing codes; support worker associations; expand dispute resolution and legal aid; bilateral agreements with sending states
Qatar	Indian, Nepali, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Pakistani	Very high; migrants ~85% of population; majority in construction and services	Labor law with contracts; kafala sponsorship system; wage protection scheme	CRC, CERD, CEDAW (with reservations); not ICCPR, ICRMW	Kafala limits worker mobility; abuse in construction/domestic sectors; limited labor complaint mechanisms	Abolish kafala; enforce wage protection; provide housing inspections; establish labor courts; pre-departure orientation; bilateral monitoring mechanisms
Kuwait	Indian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, Filipino	High; migrants ~70% of workforce; concentrated in services, domestic labor, construction	Labor contracts; kafala sponsorship; minimum wage and occupational safety	ICCPR, CRC, CERD, CEDAW	Wage delays; limited legal recourse; weak inspection	Reform kafala; strengthen inspections; introduce wage monitoring; support migrant representation; improve legal aid access
Oman	Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Filipino	Moderate; migrants ~45% of workforce	Labor law; sponsorship system; limited enforcement mechanisms	CRC, CERD, CEDAW; not ICCPR, ICRMW	Employer control over residency; weak labor inspection; lack of grievance channels	Legal reforms to protect mobility; establish independent inspections; enforce housing/health standards; enable

						worker councils
Bahrain	Indian, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Pakistani	High; migrants ~50–55% of workforce	Labor contracts; kafala system; wage regulation	ICCPR, CRC, CERD, CEDAW	Kafala restricts mobility; limited labor representation; wage delays	Abolish or reform kafala; strengthen labor courts; improve dispute resolution; enforce occupational safety and wage compliance
Iran	Pakistani, Afghan, Iraqi	Moderate; significant in construction, agriculture, services	Labor law protections; residency/work permits; informal sector prevalent	ICCPR, CRC, CERD	Weak enforcement; informal labor sector; limited inspections; low access to grievance mechanisms	Codify protections for migrants; strengthen labor inspections; provide legal aid; regulate informal labor; bilateral labor agreements
Iraq	Syrian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, other Asian	Low–moderate; mainly urban services and reconstruction	Labor law provides general protections; limited enforcement	ICCPR, CRC, CEDAW	Security instability; weak institutional capacity; limited oversight; informal employment	Establish labor courts; enforce contracts; provide legal aid; formalize informal labor; improve bilateral monitoring
Yemen	Egyptian, Bangladeshi, Ethiopian	Low; labor largely displaced due to conflict	Constitution nominally protects workers; implementation collapsed	ICCPR, CRC, CEDAW, CERD	State collapse; multiple competing authorities; almost no enforcement	Transitional legal frameworks; rebuild labor institutions; enforce basic protections post-conflict; bilateral coordination with sending states

Observations

The dependency on migrant labor varies significantly across the Persian Gulf and neighboring states, with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar exhibiting the highest levels of reliance. In these countries, expatriates constitute the overwhelming majority of the workforce, forming the backbone of construction, services, domestic labor, and professional sectors. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain also rely heavily on migrant workers, though the relative proportion of nationals is higher, slightly mitigating absolute dependency. Oman, Iran, and Iraq demonstrate moderate dependence on foreign labor, with migrants concentrated in construction, agriculture, services, and urban sectors. Yemen presents a unique case, as ongoing conflict and instability have severely constrained its migrant workforce, limiting both availability and integration into the formal labor market.

A defining structural challenge across Gulf states is the employer-based sponsorship system, commonly referred to as the kafala system. This framework creates a profound dependency of workers on individual employers, restricting mobility, limiting access to legal recourse, and leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation. The system effectively ties residency and legal status to employment, perpetuating power imbalances and creating structural barriers to labor rights. Even in countries where reform efforts have been initiated, the residual effects of employer control continue to inhibit worker autonomy and weaken protections.

Formal legal protections exist in all countries, with labor laws regulating contracts, working hours, minimum wages, occupational safety, and housing standards. However, enforcement gaps are widespread, and compliance is inconsistent. Ratification of international instruments such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families is largely absent in Gulf states, leaving migrant workers without comprehensive treaty-level safeguards. Although countries like Iran and Iraq have signed certain international labor conventions, limited enforcement capacity and administrative challenges reduce the practical effectiveness of these protections.

Persistent enforcement challenges manifest across all states, including delayed or unpaid wages, substandard housing, insufficient labor inspections, restricted access to grievance mechanisms, and weak representation in workplace decision-making. These structural and institutional shortcomings exacerbate vulnerabilities and hinder efforts to ensure equitable treatment of migrant workers.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted, rights-based approach that integrates legal reform, institutional strengthening, and social protection mechanisms. Legal reforms should focus on dismantling restrictive sponsorship systems, codifying enforceable wage and safety standards, and incorporating international labor conventions into domestic law. Strengthening labor inspections, dispute resolution mechanisms, and judicial access is essential to ensure compliance and protect workers' rights. Social protection measures such as health insurance, standardized housing, and access to legal aid help mitigate vulnerabilities, while bilateral agreements with sending countries can improve oversight, monitoring, and accountability. Civil society engagement, including support for worker associations and NGOs, enhances transparency, education, and advocacy. Comprehensive monitoring systems and clear accountability mechanisms, combined with sustained political commitment, are necessary to create lasting improvements in labor conditions. Only through an integrated strategy that

combines legal, institutional, social, and international dimensions can migrant worker welfare be safeguarded and labor market dependency managed sustainably.

Implications of Migrant Labor Dependency

The heavy reliance on migrant labor in the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Iraq has broad socio-economic, political, and governance implications. Economically, migrant workers underpin construction, services, logistics, domestic labor, and healthcare sectors, often allowing states to maintain high growth and infrastructure development while keeping national unemployment low. However, over-dependence exposes states to labor market shocks, potential social unrest, and heightened vulnerability to global migration policy shifts. The kafala system and similar sponsorship mechanisms, widespread in Gulf countries, create structural power imbalances that leave workers vulnerable to exploitation, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and legal precarity. Socially, the high proportion of non-nationals can strain housing, health services, and urban infrastructure, while also contributing to limited social integration. Labor imbalances reinforce societal inequalities and may exacerbate nationalist or xenophobic narratives. Politically, reliance on migrant labor can impact governance legitimacy, particularly where weak enforcement or unaddressed abuses undermine rule-of-law norms. For sending countries, large remittance flows are critical to domestic economies, yet dependence on Gulf labor markets can create vulnerabilities in employment and currency stability. In Iran and Iraq, though dependency is moderate, migrant labor is critical in border and urban zones; weak institutional enforcement leaves workers exposed to similar vulnerabilities. Cross-border governance gaps and limited labor inspection capacity amplify risks of exploitation and irregular migration. Regional labor competition and inconsistent legal standards across states further exacerbate vulnerabilities, undermining worker protection and creating complex bilateral challenges. Finally, persistent labor abuses can attract international scrutiny, affecting diplomatic relations, investment confidence, and compliance with human rights norms.

General Recommendations for the Region

1. Legal Reform: Abolish or reform restrictive sponsorship systems to allow labor mobility, enforce wage standards, occupational safety, and contractual rights.
2. Treaty Alignment: Ratify and implement international instruments such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers (ICRMW), ICCPR, and core ILO conventions, integrating protections into domestic law.
3. Enforcement Capacity: Strengthen labor inspection systems, ensure independent and well-resourced oversight bodies, and implement transparent complaint and dispute resolution mechanisms.
4. Social Protection Measures: Guarantee access to healthcare, housing standards, insurance coverage, and financial services for migrant workers.
5. Bilateral Agreements: Establish robust bilateral agreements between host and sending states to monitor employment terms, worker safety, and grievance mechanisms.
6. Civil Society Engagement: Support worker associations, NGOs, and community outreach to provide education on rights, legal recourse, and dispute resolution.
7. Monitoring & Accountability: Create data-driven monitoring systems, public labor rights reporting, and enforceable sanctions for employers violating labor standards.

8. Integration Programs: Encourage cultural, language, and professional integration initiatives to reduce social tension and enhance social cohesion.

Targeted Roadmap for Adoption and Enforcement of Migrant Worker Legal Rights

The roadmap focuses on systematically strengthening the legal framework, institutional enforcement, social protections, and monitoring mechanisms to safeguard migrant workers across the region.

Legal Reform and Ratification involves comprehensive revision of domestic labor laws to eliminate restrictive sponsorship systems, such as the kafala, and to codify enforceable standards on wages, working hours, occupational safety, and housing. Countries should adopt or align with international instruments, particularly the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, as well as core ILO conventions on forced labor, freedom of association, and collective bargaining. National parliaments and ministries of labor are key actors, working in consultation with legal experts, civil society organizations, and representatives of labor-sending countries. Timelines for drafting, consultation, and ratification should be staged over short to medium-term horizons to ensure legislative adoption while allowing stakeholder engagement.

Institutional Strengthening requires the establishment of independent labor inspectorates with the authority to conduct unannounced inspections, enforce compliance, and report violations. Ministries of labor, labor courts, and specialized ombudsman offices should be equipped with trained personnel, digital monitoring tools, and clear operational procedures. Regular audits and reporting mechanisms should be implemented to ensure transparency. This phase also involves upgrading judicial infrastructure to provide fast and accessible dispute resolution for migrant workers, ensuring legal aid and interpretation services are available.

Social Protection and Welfare Programs are integral to supporting migrant workers' rights. Employers must provide mandatory health insurance, adequate housing, and safe transportation. Governments should ensure that access to public services is facilitated, particularly for documented migrant workers. Sending country embassies can provide supplementary support, including information on rights, emergency assistance, and repatriation services.

Dispute Resolution and Legal Access should be facilitated through specialized labor courts or tribunals designed to handle migrant worker cases swiftly. Complaint mechanisms must be easily accessible, confidential, and protected from employer retaliation. Legal aid programs should provide multilingual support, and outreach campaigns must inform workers of their rights and available remedies.

Bilateral and Multilateral Engagement is essential for enforcement. Host countries must negotiate and maintain formal labor agreements with sending countries, setting clear expectations regarding contracts, wages, dispute resolution, and reporting obligations. Joint monitoring committees, comprising government officials and civil society representatives, can oversee compliance and resolve disputes collaboratively.

Civil Society Participation enhances accountability and advocacy. Worker councils, NGOs, and labor rights organizations should be empowered to monitor conditions, educate workers on their rights, and act as intermediaries in conflict resolution. Platforms for dialogue between workers, employers, and governments create participatory governance structures that strengthen institutional legitimacy.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability require the systematic collection of labor data, including employment numbers, sectoral distribution, grievances, inspections, and enforcement outcomes. Independent evaluations, regular public reporting, and enforceable penalties for violations are necessary to ensure continuous improvement and compliance. Governments should establish key performance indicators to track progress, including reductions in wage violations, increased access to dispute resolution, and improved living conditions.

Public Awareness and Worker Education campaigns are critical to ensuring that migrant workers understand their legal rights, reporting procedures, and protections under domestic and international law. Pre-departure orientations in sending countries, on-arrival induction sessions in host countries, and ongoing community outreach should be coordinated with embassies, NGOs, and labor attachés.

Integrated Governance and Long-Term Commitment involves embedding these strategies into national policy agendas, ensuring sustained funding, political will, and coordination across ministries of labor, interior, justice, and foreign affairs. A phased implementation plan, reviewed annually, ensures adaptability to emerging challenges, including changes in labor demand, geopolitical shifts, and demographic pressures.

In conclusion, this roadmap creates a comprehensive, rights-based, and enforceable framework for migrant labor protection. By combining legal reform, institutional capacity building, social welfare, dispute resolution, international cooperation, civil society engagement, and systematic monitoring, states can address structural vulnerabilities, reduce exploitation, and ensure the sustainable inclusion of migrant workers in their economies.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in legal reform, most notably through recent dismantling of elements of the kafala system, which historically restricted workers' mobility. Labor law revisions now codify minimum wages, working hours, occupational safety, and housing standards, though enforcement remains inconsistent. Institutional strengthening is ongoing, with the Ministry of Human Resources expanding inspection capacity, yet unannounced inspections and effective monitoring remain limited. Social protection programs cover health insurance and housing for certain categories of workers, but domestic and low-wage laborers still face gaps in access and benefits. Dispute resolution mechanisms are available through labor courts, though bureaucratic complexity and limited legal aid reduce practical access. Bilateral agreements with sending states such as India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines are being strengthened, yet joint monitoring and enforcement could be more robust. Civil society participation is restricted, with limited scope for NGOs or worker councils to engage in oversight or advocacy. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks exist but require more

systematic reporting and data transparency. Public awareness campaigns for workers are emerging but are not yet comprehensive. Integrated governance is improving with inter-ministerial coordination, but sustained political will and funding are necessary to ensure long-term effectiveness. Overall, Saudi Arabia has advanced legal reform substantially but faces challenges in implementation, oversight, and worker empowerment.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE's legal framework provides broad labor protections, including wage protection systems and health insurance mandates, but coverage of domestic and informal workers remains incomplete. Institutional strengthening has introduced labor inspectorates and complaint offices, yet enforcement gaps persist due to insufficient staff and limited outreach. Social protection programs are robust for documented workers but less accessible for lower-wage migrants. Dispute resolution is available, though procedural delays and limited legal aid reduce effectiveness. Bilateral engagement with labor-sending countries exists, yet coordination and monitoring mechanisms require expansion. Civil society participation is minimal, constraining advocacy and worker representation. Monitoring systems track wages and employment trends, but independent evaluation and public reporting are limited. Awareness campaigns target specific sectors, but many migrant workers remain unaware of their rights. Integrated governance exists across ministries of labor, justice, and interior, but long-term commitment to enforcement requires continual institutional reinforcement. The UAE demonstrates strong legal structures but must enhance enforcement, civil participation, and outreach to ensure equitable worker protections.

Qatar

Qatar has made significant reforms, including partial abolition of the kafala system, introduction of wage protection schemes, and labor laws covering non-discrimination and working hours. Institutional strengthening has created labor inspectorates and specialized dispute resolution tribunals, though their practical reach is uneven, especially for domestic workers. Social protection coverage is expanding, with health insurance and safety standards mandated, yet compliance monitoring remains uneven. Dispute resolution procedures are improving, but language barriers and limited legal aid restrict accessibility. Bilateral agreements with sending countries such as Nepal, India, and the Philippines support monitoring and repatriation, yet joint oversight is underdeveloped. Civil society engagement is limited but gradually emerging, particularly in collaboration with international organizations. Monitoring and evaluation have begun, with annual reporting on wage payments and labor violations, but transparency could be enhanced. Worker education programs, including pre-departure orientation and on-arrival briefings, are being implemented. Integrated governance is evident in inter-ministerial coordination, yet the long-term commitment to institutional capacity building and enforcement needs consolidation. Qatar demonstrates strong legal intentions, but practical enforcement and inclusivity remain areas for improvement.

Kuwait

Kuwait's labor law codifies contracts, minimum wages, and occupational safety, but gaps remain in enforcement, particularly for domestic and low-wage migrant workers. Institutional

capacity is limited, with inspections insufficient to cover all workplaces. Social protections exist but are unevenly applied, leaving some migrants vulnerable. Dispute resolution mechanisms are available but slow, and access to legal aid is restricted. Bilateral agreements with sending states exist but are inconsistently monitored. Civil society participation is weak, and workers have limited representation in decision-making processes. Monitoring and evaluation systems are underdeveloped, and public reporting is minimal. Awareness initiatives exist but reach only a fraction of migrant workers. Integrated governance mechanisms coordinate labor law enforcement, but political and institutional commitment is inconsistent. Kuwait demonstrates legal structures but requires substantial enforcement and monitoring improvements.

Bahrain

Bahrain has formal labor laws and social protections, yet residual sponsorship practices continue to create dependency. Institutional strengthening has expanded labor inspection capacity, but coverage is incomplete. Social protection includes insurance and housing standards, though enforcement is uneven. Dispute resolution is available through labor courts, but legal aid is limited. Bilateral engagement with sending states supports monitoring, but joint mechanisms could be stronger. Civil society participation is minimal, constraining oversight. Monitoring and evaluation exist but require systematic data collection and public reporting. Worker education programs are limited. Integrated governance mechanisms are in place but need sustained political and financial support. Bahrain shows progress in reform but still faces significant gaps in enforcement, civil participation, and oversight.

Oman

Oman has introduced labor laws and amnesty programs allowing more mobility for migrant workers, but protective measures are inconsistently enforced. Institutional capacity is moderate, with limited inspections and monitoring. Social protection covers some sectors but does not extend uniformly to all migrant workers. Dispute resolution mechanisms are limited, and legal aid is not universally available. Bilateral agreements exist with sending states but are not fully operationalized. Civil society participation is weak, and workers have minimal channels for advocacy. Monitoring and evaluation are basic, with limited data collection. Worker education programs exist in pilot form. Integrated governance is emerging but requires institutional strengthening and coordination across ministries. Oman demonstrates moderate progress but needs comprehensive enforcement and institutionalization of protections.

Iran

Iran offers labor law protections for migrant workers, primarily Pakistanis, Afghans, and Iraqis, but enforcement is weak, particularly in informal sectors. Institutional capacity is limited, with insufficient labor inspections and oversight. Social protection is patchy, with minimal access to health insurance and housing for migrants. Dispute resolution is available in theory but not widely accessible in practice. Bilateral engagement with sending states exists but lacks systematic monitoring. Civil society participation is restricted, reducing accountability. Monitoring and evaluation are weak, with minimal reporting and data collection. Worker awareness programs are limited. Integrated governance is fragmented, with uneven

coordination among labor, interior, and justice ministries. Iran has basic legal frameworks but faces significant gaps in implementation, monitoring, and enforcement.

Iraq

Iraq's labor law nominally protects migrant workers, but prolonged instability, conflict, and institutional fragility severely limit practical enforcement. Institutional strengthening is minimal, with weak inspection and dispute resolution mechanisms. Social protection programs are largely absent for migrants, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Dispute resolution is slow and inaccessible for most workers. Bilateral and multilateral engagement is limited, reducing oversight of migrant rights. Civil society participation is constrained, with minimal advocacy capacity. Monitoring and evaluation are underdeveloped, and public reporting is negligible. Worker education programs are almost nonexistent. Integrated governance is weak, with fragmented coordination among relevant ministries. Iraq faces major challenges, and substantial institutional, legal, and social reforms are needed to secure migrant labor rights.

Summary Evaluation Across Dimensions

Across the region, the GCC countries generally have stronger legal frameworks and more structured institutional capacity compared to Iran and Iraq, though enforcement and worker inclusion vary widely. UAE and Qatar show the highest legal sophistication, while Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait lag in inspection capacity and civil society participation. Saudi Arabia has made landmark reforms but still faces challenges in enforcement and grievance access. Iran and Iraq have legal protections in principle, but weak institutions, informal labor markets, and limited monitoring severely undermine implementation. Common challenges across all countries include gaps in dispute resolution, weak civil society engagement, insufficient monitoring and reporting, and limited worker education. A sustainable roadmap requires combining legal reform, enforcement strengthening, social protection, civil society engagement, monitoring, education, and long-term political commitment, tailored to each country's institutional capacities and labor market realities.

Table Closing the gap between Ought and Is Country-by-Country

Country	Major Migrant Communities	Dependency Level	Domestic Legal Protections	International Instruments Ratified	Enforcement Gaps	Targeted Strategies / Roadmap
Saudi Arabia	Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Filipino, Nepali	High; migrants ~30–35% of population; concentrated in construction, domestic labor, services	Labor law covering contracts, minimum wages, occupational safety; recent kafala reform	CRC, CERD, CEDAW (with reservations); not ICRMW	Weak inspections, delayed wages, limited legal aid, residual employer control	Consolidate kafala reform; expand independent labor inspections; establish legal aid centers; implement bilateral agreements;

						enforce occupational safety; improve dispute resolution
UAE	Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Sri Lankan, African	Very high; expatriates ~88% of population; dominate construction, services, finance, domestic sectors	Labor law with contracts, wage protection system; kafala system persists in some sectors	CRC, CERD, CEDAW (with reservations); not ICRMW	Limited coverage for domestic workers, uneven enforcement, weak grievance channels	Extend legal coverage to all sectors; strengthen inspections; create migrant welfare boards; provide multilingual legal assistance; bilateral monitoring; embed digital wage contracts
Qatar	Indian, Nepali, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Pakistani	Very high; migrants ~85% of population; concentrated in construction and services	Labor law covering wages, work hours, non-discrimination; limited coverage for domestic workers	CRC, CERD, CEDAW (with reservations); not ICRMW	Kafala restrictions, inconsistent enforcement, lack of worker representation	Fully abolish kafala; enforce wage protection; integrate domestic workers; strengthen inspections; establish specialized labor tribunals; bilateral oversight with sending countries
Kuwait	Indian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, Filipino	High; migrants ~70% of workforce; concentrated in services and domestic labor	Labor law with contracts, minimum wages, occupational safety; kafala system exists	ICCPR, CRC, CERD, CEDAW	Wage delays, limited dispute resolution, weak inspections	Expand labor inspectorate; accelerate dispute resolution; provide legal aid centers; strengthen bilateral agreements; enforce occupational safety and housing regulations

Bahrain	Indian, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Pakistani	High; migrants ~50–55% of workforce	Labor law with contracts and wage regulation; residual sponsorship practices	ICCPR, CRC, CERD, CEDAW	Residual kafala constraints, weak oversight, limited representation	Abolish remaining sponsorship restrictions; extend social insurance; create independent migrant advocacy offices; strengthen bilateral cooperation; enforce occupational safety
Oman	Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Filipino	Moderate; migrants ~45% of workforce	Labor law with contracts, wage and safety standards; partial sponsorship system	CRC, CERD, CEDAW; not ICCPR, ICRMW	Weak inspections, limited grievance access, informal sector vulnerability	Institutionalize social protections; integrate migrant workers into formal insurance; empower labor inspectors; establish accessible dispute resolution and complaint mechanisms
Iran	Pakistani, Afghan, Iraqi	Moderate; concentrated in construction, agriculture, urban services	Labor law provides partial coverage; residency permits required	ICCPR, CRC, CERD	Informal labor, weak enforcement, limited legal recourse	Codify migrant protections; strengthen inspections; provide legal aid; formalize informal labor; establish bilateral agreements for monitoring
Iraq	Syrian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, other Asian	Low–moderate; mainly urban services and reconstruction	Labor law nominally covers workers; informal sector large	ICCPR, CRC, CEDAW	Weak enforcement, institutional fragility, limited oversight	Rebuild labor institutions; standardize contracts; establish labor tribunals; integrate informal

						workers; bilateral cooperation with sending states; legal aid programs
Yemen	Egyptian, Bangladeshi, Ethiopian	Low; constrained by conflict	Constitution nominally protects workers; implementation limited	ICCPR, CRC, CEDAW, CERD	Governance collapse, limited enforcement, high vulnerability	Establish transitional labor frameworks; rebuild institutions; enforce basic protections; coordinate with sending states and international agencies for monitoring

This table shows dependency, legal framework, enforcement gaps, and actionable strategies in one place, highlighting where each country requires reforms and targeted interventions.

The Persian Gulf states exhibit significant variation in their dependency on migrant labor, with the UAE and Qatar at the top of the scale due to their highly expatriate-dominated workforces, while Iran, Iraq, and Yemen show moderate to low dependence.

Legal protections for migrant workers are strongest in UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, where reforms have codified labor standards and partially dismantled restrictive sponsorship systems, though gaps remain in domestic and informal sectors. Enforcement strength is generally moderate across GCC countries, with institutional inspectorates and labor courts in place, but inconsistent application and limited coverage reduce practical impact.

Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait demonstrate weaker enforcement despite moderate legal frameworks, reflecting capacity constraints and limited civil society engagement. Iran and Iraq exhibit the lowest scores for enforcement, where fragile institutions and informal labor markets hinder the protection of migrant workers' rights. Roadmap readiness, defined as the ability to implement integrated legal, institutional, and social strategies, is highest in Saudi Arabia and UAE due to existing reforms and inter-ministerial coordination. Qatar is moderately ready, reflecting strong policy intentions but uneven implementation, while Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain require substantial capacity building. Iran and Iraq have minimal roadmap readiness, needing foundational institutional strengthening, legislative reform, and civil society participation. Across all countries, gaps remain in monitoring, grievance access, worker education, and the incorporation of international labor standards. Prioritizing integrated governance, bilateral engagement, and continuous evaluation will be essential to translate legal protections into effective, rights-based outcomes for migrant workers.

The UAE and Qatar have the highest dependency on migrant labor, requiring sustained enforcement and monitoring to ensure protections keep pace with workforce size. Saudi Arabia shows strong legal frameworks and roadmap readiness, but gaps in enforcement and worker

education must be addressed to fully realize reforms. Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman have moderate legal protections, yet weak enforcement and limited civil society participation undermine practical outcomes for migrant workers. Iran and Iraq display the lowest scores across legal, enforcement, and roadmap dimensions, highlighting urgent needs for foundational institutional reforms.

Yemen's ongoing conflict limits labor market integration, making external support and transitional protections critical. Across all countries, strengthening independent labor inspections and expanding accessible grievance mechanisms will directly improve compliance and worker safety. Bilateral engagement with sending states should be intensified to ensure contracts, wages, and repatriation processes are effectively monitored. Public awareness campaigns and pre-departure orientations can empower workers to understand and claim their legal rights. Civil society participation, including worker councils and NGOs, should be institutionalized to enhance accountability and advocacy. Finally, integrated governance, inter-ministerial coordination, and continuous monitoring are essential to translate legal reforms into sustainable, rights-based outcomes across the region.

11. Civil Liberties

Civil liberties are the fundamental individual rights and freedoms that protect citizens from arbitrary interference or abuse by the state, ensuring personal autonomy, equality, and participation in public life. These rights typically include freedom of expression, assembly, and association; the right to a fair trial; privacy; freedom of religion and conscience; protection against arbitrary detention; and political participation. Civil liberties are distinguished from social or economic rights in that they primarily impose negative obligations on the state—requiring it to refrain from unjustified restrictions or coercion—while creating the conditions for free exercise of individual freedoms.

The United Nations (UN) has codified civil liberties through several key international instruments. The cornerstone is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), which articulates broad civil and political rights applicable to all individuals, including freedoms of opinion, expression, assembly, and participation in government. Building on the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) establishes legally binding obligations for states to respect and protect civil liberties, providing mechanisms for individual complaints and periodic state reporting. Other UN instruments relevant to civil liberties include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD, 1965), which safeguards equality and non-discrimination, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which guarantees the civil and political rights of minors. Regional human rights instruments, though outside the UN framework, complement these protections, but in the Gulf, the lack of binding regional enforcement mechanisms means UN instruments often rely on domestic incorporation and executive willingness for implementation.

In essence, civil liberties are the foundational legal protections enabling individuals to live freely and participate meaningfully in society, while UN instruments provide both normative guidance and legal obligations for states to uphold these freedoms.

Civil liberties in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman—are shaped by a hybrid legal architecture that combines constitutional provisions, Islamic law traditions, statutory legislation, and executive decrees. Across the region, constitutions formally guarantee certain rights such as equality before the law, limited freedom of expression, protection of property, and in some cases consultative political participation. However, these guarantees are typically framed within broad clauses referencing public order, morality, national unity, or state security, which provide governments wide discretionary authority to restrict civil liberties.

The legal background in the GCC reflects monarchical governance systems in which executive authority remains strong and legislative bodies—where they exist—often exercise consultative rather than fully independent powers. Kuwait stands out for its comparatively robust elected parliament, which has historically provided a platform for debate and contestation, though it remains constrained by executive authority. Bahrain's bicameral legislature combines elected and appointed members, but political society laws and restrictions on opposition groups have limited pluralism. Qatar and the UAE maintain advisory councils with evolving consultative roles, while Saudi Arabia's Shura Council remains appointed. Oman's bicameral system incorporates elected and appointed chambers, though legislative authority remains circumscribed.

Key legal instruments shaping civil liberties include cybercrime laws, anti-terrorism statutes, public assembly regulations, press and publications laws, and NGO association frameworks. Cybercrime legislation across the GCC often criminalizes online speech deemed harmful to national unity, public order, or state institutions. Anti-terror laws, while designed to address legitimate security concerns, frequently contain broad definitions that can encompass peaceful dissent. Public assembly laws typically require prior authorization for demonstrations, limiting spontaneous collective action. Media laws regulate licensing, content, and editorial independence, reinforcing state oversight. NGO regulations often impose strict registration procedures, funding restrictions, and supervisory oversight, constraining civil society autonomy.

Internationally, GCC states are parties to various global human rights instruments, including core United Nations treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, reservations based on Islamic law or national legislation limit the domestic effect of some treaty obligations. The absence of binding regional human rights enforcement mechanisms in the Gulf reduces external oversight, leaving implementation largely within domestic executive control.

Table State of Play on Civil Liberties

Country	UN Civil Liberties Instruments (ICCPR etc.)	Domestic Legal Protections	Civil Liberties Index (1 = strong, 7 = weak)	Human Rights & Rule-of-Law Index (0 = strong, 10 = weak)	Current Constraints & Enforcement Gaps

Saudi Arabia	Not party to **ICCPR** or **ICESCR**, has ratified some human rights treaties with reservations.	Constitution/basic law includes rights references, but broad security exceptions limit practical protections. (House of Lords Library)	~6 (very weak).)	~8.4 (high rights deficit). (	Broad anti-terror/cyber laws restrict expression; weak judicial independence; limited political participation.
Iraq	State party to **ICCPR**, **CERD**, **CWC**, and others; constitutional protections for rights. (ICNL)	Rights in constitution often undermined by security/arbitrary detention laws. (Amnesty International)	~6 (weak). (TheGlobalEconomy.com)	~8.1 (high human rights and rule-of-law challenges). (Maxinomics)	Sectarian dynamics, weak courts, ant-terror laws restrict free expression and assembly in practice.
Iran	Party to **ICCPR**, **CRC**, **CERD** but with reservations limiting application. (The Millennium Project)	Constitution provides rights, but enforcement is inconsistent; religious authorities have oversight. (Amnesty International)	~7 (very weak). (TheGlobalEconomy.com)	~9.8 (very high rights and rule-of-law deficit). (Maxinomics)	Broad national security/morality grounds curb dissent, religious minorities face discrimination.
UAE	Ratified **CRC**, **CERD**, **CEDAW** (with reservations), not **ICCPR**. (ICNL)	Constitution nominally protects rights; cyber/terror laws often restrict civil liberties. (House of Lords Library)	~6 (weak). (TheGlobalEconomy.com)	~7.1. (Maxinomics)	Restrictions on expression, assembly; limited political pluralism; labor rights issues.
Qatar	Has ratified **CRC**, **CERD**, **CEDAW** with reservations. (ICNL)	Constitution provides some freedoms; security and public order laws curtail rights. (House of Lords Library)	~5 (moderate-weak). (TheGlobalEconomy.com)	~5.8 (moderate). (Maxinomics)	Limited political participation; no space for independent political bodies.
Oman	Ratified **CERD**, **CRC**, **CEDAW**; not party to **ICCPR**. (ICNL)	Constitution nominally protects freedoms but practice is restrictive. (House of Lords Library)	~1 (strong comm rights but limited participatory freedoms). (TheGlobalEconomy.com)	~6.8 (moderate defect). (Maxinomics)	Limited political parties; restrictions on public assembly; no independent judiciary.
Bahrain	Ratified **ICCPR**, **CRC**, **CERD**,	Constitutions guarantee civil liberties, but security laws	~6 (weak).	~8.6 (very high rights and	Political societies restricted; press and assembly

	CEDAW. (ICNL)	used broadly. (House of Lords Library)		rule-of-law deficit).	tightly regulated.
Yemen	Ratified **ICCPR**, **CRC**, **CEDAW**, **CERD**; implementation collapsed. (ICNL)	Constitution includes rights protections, but ongoing conflict undermines enforcement. (House of Lords Library)	~6 (weak).)	~9.9 (worst in region).)	Governance collapse; multiple authorities; pervasive human rights abuses.
Kuwait	Ratified **ICCPR**, **CRC**, **CEDAW**, **CERD**.	Constitution protects rights; legal practice more open than many Gulf neighbors.	~5 (moderate). (	~7.2 (moderate rights deficit).	Political party activities restricted; public order laws can be broad.

From a governance perspective, the principal challenge lies not only in the existence of rights provisions but in enforcement gaps, broad statutory language, and limited judicial independence. Courts in the GCC vary in structure and autonomy, but in many cases judges are appointed by the executive, and constitutional review mechanisms are either limited or rarely invoked. Administrative discretion, particularly in security-related cases, further narrows the practical scope of civil liberties.

Strengthening governance in the GCC would require clarifying statutory language to narrow overly broad provisions that enable expansive interpretation. Clearer definitions in anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws could distinguish between violent threats and peaceful political expression. Judicial independence could be enhanced through transparent appointment processes, fixed tenure protections, and strengthened constitutional review capacities. Establishing independent national human rights institutions with investigatory authority and public reporting mandates would increase accountability and institutional credibility.

Increasing pluralism necessitates calibrated political reform. Expanding the legislative authority of elected chambers, permitting structured political societies within defined legal frameworks, and easing restrictions on peaceful assembly would broaden participatory space. Reform of NGO laws to simplify registration and permit diversified funding sources would invigorate civil society. Media reform could move from prior restraint models toward post-publication accountability systems aligned with international standards.

Plugging loopholes and lapses in legal protection also requires procedural safeguards. Due process guarantees, including timely access to legal counsel, transparent charges, and public trials, should be codified and consistently enforced. Independent oversight bodies for detention facilities and law enforcement agencies could address abuse allegations and strengthen rule-of-law credibility. Digital governance reforms should incorporate data protection laws, judicial warrants for surveillance, and transparent cybersecurity oversight to balance security with privacy.

Gradual reform strategies are likely more sustainable than abrupt transformations. GCC governments often frame stability as a prerequisite for reform, suggesting that governance

improvements must be sequenced carefully. Economic diversification agendas and youth empowerment initiatives provide potential entry points for civic participation expansion, particularly in consultative forums and local governance initiatives. Incremental pluralization—through municipal elections, advisory councils, and professional associations—could build participatory habits without destabilizing political order.

Ultimately, civil liberties in the GCC operate within a state-centric governance model prioritizing stability and executive authority. The legal background contains formal rights protections but is characterized by broad discretionary clauses and strong security legislation. Strengthening governance and increasing pluralism would require narrowing legal ambiguities, enhancing judicial independence, empowering civil society, and institutionalizing oversight mechanisms. The long-term trajectory will depend on whether reformist impulses—often linked to economic modernization and generational change—translate into durable institutional transformation that balances state security with expanded civic space.

12. Political Restrictions

Political liberties are the fundamental rights that enable individuals to participate meaningfully in the political life of their society. These include the right to vote and be elected, freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, access to information, and the ability to form political parties and civic organisations without undue restriction. Political liberties are essential components of democratic governance and are formally protected under UN legal instruments, most notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which commits states to guarantee these rights, including electoral rights (Article 25), freedom of expression (Article 19), freedom of assembly (Article 21) and freedom of association (Article 22) subject only to narrowly defined restrictions for public order or national security consistent with international norms.

Law is law, and the law has to be kept. Normally, states take this very seriously. No state is forced to observe laws they do not wish observing, or do not have the capacity to enforce. The only the international community then expect is they don't sign up to the relevant instruments and conventions to remain credible and not hyprocrites, and to be honest about what to expect if you are a citizen or a resident in the Arab province.

The Persian Gulf region, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, generally exhibits limited political liberties in practice, despite constitutional or legal references to certain rights. Human rights assessments indicate that across the six Gulf monarchies — Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman — freedom of expression, the press, and political participation are constrained by executive authority, restrictive assembly laws, and limits on political parties and civil society activity. These limitations include restrictions on independent media, legal barriers to political organisation, and broad security provisions used to suppress dissent.

In Iran, political liberties are severely restricted under the Islamic Republic's constitutional and legal framework. Although elections are held, unelected bodies such as the Guardian Council vet candidates and exercise significant control over political competition, resulting in extremely limited space for genuine pluralism and opposition participation. Freedom House

classifies Iran as "Not Free" with very low scores for political rights, reflecting the lack of meaningful political pluralism, severe curbs on expression and assembly, and dominance of unelected institutions in governance. State institutions, including the judiciary and security apparatus, play a central role in repressing dissent, detaining activists, and restricting independent media, often under broadly defined charges related to national security or morality.

Iraq's political liberties are constitutionally protected, with provisions guaranteeing freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and formation of associations and political parties, and these rights are codified in Article 38 and related sections of its post 2005 constitution. However, in practice Iraq is classified as "Not Free" by Freedom House; political rights and civil liberties are undermined by systemic corruption, the influence of militias and external actors, weak formal institutions, and legal and extralegal restrictions on expression and association. Despite regular elections, governance dysfunction, security challenges, and restrictive or vaguely worded laws on expression impede the effective exercise of political liberties, reducing civic trust and participation.

Several universal UN instruments articulate and reinforce political liberties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims rights to participate in government, freedom of opinion, speech, assembly, and association. The legally binding ICCPR elaborates these protections and establishes reporting and review mechanisms through the UN Human Rights Committee, which evaluates state compliance and issues guidance on implementation. Other instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CERD) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), also encompass aspects of political participation and nondiscrimination that intersect with political liberties, thoughpolitical rights are principally codified in the ICCPR.

In the GCC, despite some consultative councils and limited electoral processes in Kuwait and Bahrain, political liberties remain tightly managed with significant restrictions on political parties, public protest, and independent civil society — features that diverge from ICCPR's envisioned norms. Similarly, Iran and Iraq's legal frameworks afford formal protections, but institutional practices and political realities significantly limit their realisation, resulting in low global freedom rankings and constrained civic and political space across the region.

Table Fancy a Sultan ?

Country	ICCPR Ratification Status	Constitutional Guarantees of Political Liberties	Gap in Practice
Saudi Arabia	Not a party to ICCPR (has neither signed nor ratified)	Basic Law refers to rights but allows severe limits on expression, association, and elections (executive rule dominant)	High: No binding international obligation; domestic legal restrictions restrict political speech and participation
United Arab Emirates	Not a party to ICCPR	Federal Constitution includes limited references to rights but allows restrictions for "public order" and prohibits political parties	High: No ICCPR obligations; political liberties are weak in law and practice
Qatar	Not a party to ICCPR	Constitution mentions rights but political participation is	High: ICCPR absence limits enforcement;

		tightly controlled and parties are banned	domestic restrictions are broad
Kuwait	Ratified ICCPR	Constitution protects freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; has an elected National Assembly	Moderate: Guarantees exist but executive powers and security laws constrain realisation
Bahrain	Ratified ICCPR	Constitution guarantees political rights, but security and public order laws often override them	High: Political liberties curtailed through broad internal security laws
Oman	Not a party to ICCPR	Basic Law offers limited references to rights but no robust guarantees of plural political participation	High: Lack of ICCPR plus domestic restrictions weaken liberties
Iran	Ratified ICCPR	Constitution affirms certain political liberties, but vetting councils and unelected bodies limit pluralism	High: ICCPR obligations are undermined by internal legal structures and practices
Iraq	Ratified ICCPR	Constitution robustly guarantees freedoms of expression, assembly, and association	Moderate: Guarantees strong on paper but enforcement is limited by weak institutions and militia influence
Yemen	Ratified ICCPR.	Constitution guarantees political rights	Very High Gap: Conflict, fragmented governance, and weak rule of law prevent implementation

Notes on Ratification and Meaning:

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is the principal treaty committing states to respect political rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, association, and participation in public affairs. Ratification means a state has legally bound itself to uphold these rights and report to the UN Human Rights Committee, which reviews compliance.

Most GCC states have not ratified the ICCPR (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Oman), meaning they lack this external binding obligation to enforce political liberties, even where constitutions nominally reference rights. Kuwait, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen have ratified the ICCPR, creating legal obligations on paper, but enforcement and implementation vary dramatically across contexts.

How to Close the Implementation Gap

1. Ratification and Engagement with ICCPR

States that have not yet ratified the ICCPR should commit to accession and establish a timeline for ratification, including consideration of the First Optional Protocol, which allows individual complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee. This embeds accountability and external review of state practices.

2. Constitutional and Legislative Reform

When constitutions guarantee political liberties, domestic laws must be reviewed to reduce broad security exceptions that routinely override rights. Kuwait and Iraq, for example, need to revise public order and anti terror laws that curtail freedoms despite constitutional language.

3. Judicial Reinforcement

Effective enforcement requires independent courts that can interpret both domestic and international commitments. Training judicial actors on ICCPR standards, and establishing constitutional review mechanisms, would align judicial practice with treaty obligations.

4. Civil Society and Media Freedom

Enforcement gaps are compounded where civil society and media are restricted. Legal reforms that simplify NGO registration, protect journalists, and allow peaceful assembly are critical stepping stones toward meaningful rights realisation.

5. Education and Rights Awareness

Public campaigns to educate citizens and residents about political rights strengthen domestic demand for enforcement. This includes training for officials, judges, and security forces on international norms and domestic obligations.

6. Independent Monitoring Bodies

Establishment of independent human rights commissions with investigatory powers can help bridge law and practice. These bodies would publish reports, handle complaints, and recommend legislative and institutional reform.

7. Civil Dialogue Mechanisms

Instituting permanent forums for dialogue between government, civil society, and political groups enhances transparency and trust, and creates domestic accountability pathways that complement international obligations.

Constitutional Guarantees vs Practice

Even where constitutions enshrine freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, practical restrictions often render these rights aspirational rather than enforceable. Examples include broad public order and anti terror laws used to penalise dissent, executive overreach, and limitations on independent media. Ratifying the ICCPR and aligning domestic legislation with its provisions helps create legal tools that citizens and courts can use to challenge oppressive practices.

There is a significant discrepancy between formal guarantees and realisation of political liberties across the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Iraq. The ICCPR constitutes the most critical legal instrument for grounding political rights in binding international law, yet it remains unratified by key Gulf states, limiting external accountability. Even among ratifying countries, enforcement gaps persist due to executive authority, restrictive laws, weak judicial

independence, and limited civil society space. Closing these gaps requires a multi dimensional strategy that includes ratification, constitutional and legislative reform, institutional strengthening, civil society engagement, and rights education, ensuring that commitments to political liberties are consistently and effectively enforced.

The Hammurabi Initiative

The Hammurabi program is a structured collaboration between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the European Union, designed to strengthen political liberties, civil liberties, rule of law, and governance standards while respecting regional contexts and sovereignty. The program seeks to harmonize legal and institutional frameworks with international norms, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and related UN instruments. It focuses on enhancing freedom of expression by strengthening legal guarantees for independent media, reducing censorship, and protecting journalists. Freedom of assembly and association will be reinforced to support the right to form associations, unions, and civic organizations, ensuring peaceful assembly. Electoral rights and participation will be promoted through transparent processes, independent oversight, and inclusive political participation. Judicial independence will be enhanced through strengthened legal frameworks, court autonomy, and improved access to justice mechanisms. Anti-corruption and accountability standards will be implemented to promote institutional transparency, anti-corruption legislation, and monitoring mechanisms.

Civil society empowerment is central, with capacity building for NGOs, worker councils, and civic organizations to advocate and participate in governance. Human rights education will include public campaigns, official training, and awareness programs for citizens, officials, and media personnel. Monitoring, reporting, and evaluation systems will be established to track compliance and produce periodic reviews, ensuring transparency and measurable progress.

The program will be implemented in phases, beginning with assessment and planning, during which country-specific evaluations of legal frameworks, governance capacity, and enforcement gaps will be conducted. Baseline indicators for civil and political liberties will be established using Freedom House scores, ICCPR compliance, and domestic laws. Priority areas will be identified for each GCC state and aligned with EU best practices. Legal and institutional reforms will follow, supporting governments in reviewing constitutions and laws to align with ICCPR standards and promoting administrative and judicial autonomy. Civil society and media engagement will include workshops, public dialogues, media literacy campaigns, and technical assistance for NGOs and civic groups to monitor political liberties and advocate for reform. Monitoring and accountability mechanisms will involve joint GCC-EU committees, digital reporting platforms, and annual regional reviews to track reforms and enforcement outcomes. Knowledge sharing and capacity building will create a GCC-EU Political Liberty Academy to train officials, judiciary, and civil society actors, supplemented by peer-to-peer learning exchanges and the production of manuals, toolkits, and policy guidelines.

Key actors include GCC ministries of justice, interior, labor, and foreign affairs, EU institutions such as the European External Action Service and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and international bodies including the UN Human Rights Office, OSCE, and the

ILO where relevant. The program is envisioned over a phased timeline, with assessment and planning completed within the first 6 to 12 months, legal and institutional reforms over 12 to 24 months, civil society engagement spanning 12 to 36 months, and continuous monitoring and capacity-building activities overlapping all phases. Funding will come from a joint GCC-EU pool supplemented by multilateral support, and resources will be allocated to workshops, media campaigns, training programs, and compliance systems. Expected outcomes include alignment of GCC legal frameworks with ICCPR and UN standards, strengthened judicial independence and rule of law, empowered civil society and media, enhanced citizen participation, and measurable improvements in political liberties and governance indicators over a five-year horizon. The program codename, Hammurabi, symbolizes the rule of law, codified standards, and justice, emphasizing the commitment to structured, enforceable, and transparent governance reforms that are regionally sensitive and internationally aligned.

Figure Good Job, I will buy you a Beer

Source: https://theswaen.com/the-code-of-hammurabi-ancient-laws-beer-and-everyday-life/

Summary

Human-level issues in the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Iraq are concentrated around the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, restricted civil liberties, and limited political freedoms. Migrant workers face systemic exploitation due to weak labor protections, restrictive sponsorship systems, and enforcement gaps, leaving them vulnerable to wage violations, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to justice. Civil liberties, including freedom of expression, assembly, and association, are curtailed by broad security laws and weak institutional oversight, while political participation is tightly controlled through restricted elections, executive dominance, and limitations on opposition or civic engagement.

Actionable insights include reforming labor laws to align with international standards such as the ICCPR and ILO conventions, strengthening enforcement mechanisms through independent inspectorates and accessible grievance systems, and providing social protections and education for migrant workers. For civil liberties, governments should revise restrictive legislation, expand judicial independence, and facilitate civil society participation to enhance accountability. Political restrictions can be addressed by enabling genuine electoral processes, increasing transparency, and embedding oversight mechanisms that allow citizens to engage meaningfully in governance. Coordinated strategies combining legal reform, institutional

strengthening, public awareness, and multilateral engagement are essential to ensure that rights are both guaranteed in law and realized in practice across the region.

These measures will create sustainable improvements in human-level governance, protect vulnerable populations, and foster a more participatory and resilient societal framework.

Allow yourself to play broader.

Your grandfathers may all have attended schools in Istanbul, but the modernization potential of the Arab independence movement can not and must not stop at Sultanistic governance modes. Leigitmate Islamic discourse allows both for strengthening of governance and the forging of more pluralistic policy making system most of which boils down to organisation and proper training , tools and techniques for great accountability and participatory governance. So much more the eastern tradition is the originator of rule of law and human rights were invented by: Iran.

13. Maritime Security in the Persian Gulf

Maritime security in the Persian Gulf must be understood through the dual lenses of maritime regionalism and maritime threat analysis, both of which illuminate why this narrow waterway remains one of the most strategically volatile maritime spaces in the world. The Gulf is not merely a transit corridor but a dense geopolitical arena in which energy flows, naval doctrines, regime security concerns, and external power competition intersect. The Strait of Hormuz, as the primary chokepoint linking Gulf producers to global markets, concentrates vulnerability into a confined maritime geography where even minor incidents can escalate rapidly and reverberate across international energy markets. The shallow waters, heavy commercial traffic, proximity of rival coastlines, and limited maneuvering space create structural conditions in which deterrence, signaling, and miscalculation coexist uneasily.

From a maritime regionalism perspective, the Persian Gulf presents a paradox. The littoral states share an overwhelming economic interest in secure sea lines of communication, uninterrupted hydrocarbon exports, and protection of offshore infrastructure. These shared interests should, in theory, generate cooperative security institutions and collective maritime governance mechanisms. Maritime regionalism assumes that geographic proximity and functional interdependence encourage the development of shared norms, joint patrols, information-sharing frameworks, and crisis management procedures. Yet in the Gulf, historical rivalries, ideological cleavages, and asymmetric military capabilities have impeded the emergence of a cohesive regional maritime order. Instead of a unified Gulf maritime regime, the security architecture is fragmented between national navies, ad hoc coalitions, and external security guarantees.

Maritime threat analysis further clarifies the drivers of instability. The most prominent threat vector remains state-level rivalry, particularly between Iran and several GCC states, which manifests in naval maneuvering, coercive signaling, and periodic confrontations involving commercial shipping. Iran's emphasis on asymmetric naval doctrine, including fast attack craft, anti-ship missiles, and naval mines, reflects a strategy designed to offset conventional disadvantages and complicate adversary access. This anti-access and area-denial posture raises the stakes of any confrontation and increases the risk that limited harassment or seizure

operations could spiral into broader escalation. The threat environment is compounded by the presence of non-state actors, smuggling networks, and proxy dynamics that blur attribution and complicate deterrence calculations. In such a congested maritime theater, ambiguity itself becomes a strategic instrument.

Within this environment, the United States Fifth Fleet plays a pivotal structural role. Headquartered in Bahrain, it serves as the primary American naval command responsible for operations across the Gulf, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and adjacent waters. Its remit extends from ensuring freedom of navigation to deterring aggression, escorting vulnerable shipping, conducting surveillance and intelligence gathering, and coordinating multinational maritime security efforts. The Fleet anchors the Combined Maritime Forces and associated task groups, which bring together numerous partner navies to counter piracy, illicit trafficking, and destabilizing maritime activity. Beyond its operational mandate, the Fifth Fleet embodies the external security guarantee upon which many Gulf monarchies rely, signaling sustained U.S. commitment to protecting maritime commerce and regional stability.

The Fleet's presence, however, is both stabilizing and politically sensitive. On one hand, it deters overt attempts to close the Strait of Hormuz and reassures Gulf partners whose economic lifelines depend on open sea lanes. On the other hand, it reinforces a security architecture centered on external balancing rather than indigenous maritime regionalism. For Iran, the Fleet symbolizes encirclement and external intrusion, reinforcing its reliance on asymmetric maritime tools. Thus, while the Fifth Fleet reduces immediate risks of disruption, it also reflects the underlying absence of a comprehensive, regionally owned maritime security framework.

The idea of a Persian Gulf maritime security pact emerges from this structural gap. Such a pact would aim to institutionalize shared threat assessment, crisis communication, coordinated patrols, and legal harmonization across littoral states. At its core, it would seek to transform maritime security from a zero-sum competition into a collective public good. Confidence-building measures, joint exercises, and incident-at-sea agreements could reduce miscalculation and foster predictability. A regional maritime coordination center with representation from all Gulf littoral states could enhance transparency in vessel tracking and maritime domain awareness. Harmonized rules for boarding, inspections, and responses to maritime incidents would further professionalize and depoliticize routine interactions at sea.

Yet the prospects for such a pact remain constrained by enduring mistrust. The Saudi–Iranian rivalry, ideological divergence, and competing threat perceptions inhibit deep institutionalization. GCC states, accustomed to relying on U.S. and Western naval power, may perceive limited incentives to dilute external guarantees in favor of uncertain regional arrangements. Iran, for its part, may view multilateral frameworks skeptically if they are perceived as codifying existing power imbalances. Institutional weakness within existing regional bodies further complicates the creation of a standing maritime governance mechanism with operational authority.

Nevertheless, incrementalism offers a more realistic pathway than grand bargains. Functional cooperation on search and rescue, environmental protection, or anti-smuggling operations could serve as low-politics entry points into broader maritime coordination. Expanding incident-at-sea agreements and establishing direct naval communication hotlines would reduce

the risk of accidental escalation. Observer participation in exercises and reciprocal port visits could gradually normalize professional interaction among naval forces. Over time, these measures could generate habits of cooperation that support a more formalized maritime compact.

Ultimately, maritime security in the Persian Gulf is shaped by a tension between structural interdependence and political fragmentation. The economic logic of shared sea lanes pushes toward regionalism, while geopolitical rivalry pulls toward militarization and external balancing. The U.S. Fifth Fleet remains the linchpin of deterrence and freedom of navigation, but it cannot substitute indefinitely for indigenous maritime governance. A viable maritime security pact would not eliminate rivalry but could channel it into regulated interaction, reducing the likelihood that localized incidents trigger systemic crises. The long-term stability of the Gulf maritime domain will depend on whether littoral states can gradually reconcile strategic competition with the undeniable reality that their prosperity is inseparable from a secure and collectively managed sea.

14. Urbanism in the Persian Gulf: Shaping the Modern Global City

Urbanism in the Persian Gulf represents one of the most striking examples of rapid, intentional city-making in the modern era. Cities such as Dubai, Doha, and Abu Dhabi did not emerge through centuries of gradual accumulation of culture, commerce, or population. Rather, they were consciously designed, funded, and governed to serve as engines of economic growth, global connectivity, and symbolic power. In these urban environments, wealth, ambition, and vision are the raw materials from which the city itself is constructed, and architecture, infrastructure, and urban planning become instruments not only of function but also of identity.

The making of these cities is rooted in a convergence of geography, resource wealth, and strategic state vision. For much of the twentieth century, the Persian Gulf's urban settlements were modest, often clustered around ports or desert oases. The discovery and commercialization of oil transformed the region, providing unprecedented financial resources. Governments and ruling families leveraged this wealth to create cities that could attract global attention and investment. Urbanism here was not an accidental byproduct of trade or settlement—it was an intentional process, carefully managed through long-term planning agencies, state-backed developers, and visionary architectural projects. The land itself became a canvas, reshaped through massive infrastructure projects, land reclamation, and artificial islands. Entire districts were designed from scratch, with meticulous attention to highways, public spaces, luxury residential towers, and commercial centers, reflecting a singular focus on creating an urban environment that could host and sustain global flows of capital and people.

Over time, these cities have undergone remarkable transformations. Early urban plans focused on basic infrastructure and accommodating rapid population growth, often for a largely expatriate workforce. Later, the emphasis shifted to creating world-class skylines and districts that could rival iconic global metropolises. The cities experimented with urban forms that challenge conventional models, including vertical urbanism, mixed-use megaprojects, and self-contained luxury districts. The urban landscape has continually evolved in response to economic imperatives, demographic shifts, and technological innovations, making Persian Gulf cities living laboratories of modern urbanism. This dynamism highlights a form of

urbanism that is adaptive, flexible, and profoundly strategic, designed to maintain the city's competitive edge in a rapidly globalizing world.

Governance plays a central role in shaping Gulf urbanism. Unlike many Western cities where urban growth is mediated by multiple stakeholders and complex bureaucracies, Persian Gulf cities are often governed through centralized authorities with extensive control over planning and development. Royal families and state agencies exercise decisive power over urban projects, determining zoning, financing large-scale developments, and attracting foreign investment. This centralized governance enables swift execution of ambitious projects, allowing the city to transform almost overnight in ways unimaginable in more procedurally constrained urban contexts. The governance structure also allows these cities to pursue long-term visions that integrate economic, cultural, and symbolic objectives, reinforcing the city itself as both a functional and representational entity.

Figure House of Approximation, A Micro Eco-system extending to both sides of the House
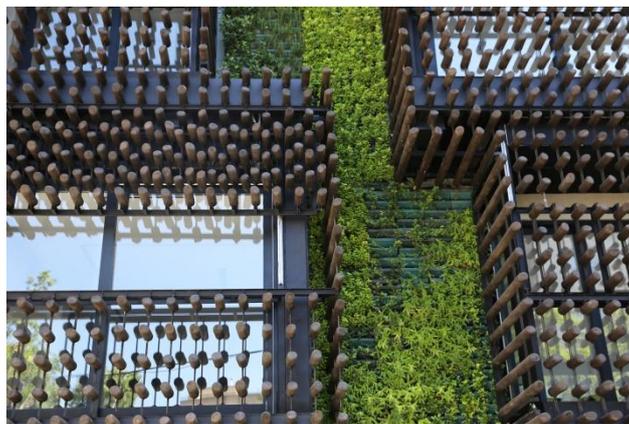
Despite their economic sophistication and global visibility, Persian Gulf cities are notable for having relatively few world-class cultural institutions or globally recognized artists. Unlike traditional cultural capitals such as Paris, London, or New York, these cities cannot rely on centuries of artistic production to establish global significance. Instead, they have harnessed urbanism itself as a form of cultural expression. Architectural icons such as the Burj Khalifa, the Palm Jumeirah, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi serve as both functional spaces and symbolic statements, projecting a vision of modernity, wealth, and ambition. The urban landscape becomes a kind of cultural theater, where the city itself embodies progress, innovation, and global relevance.

In this sense, Persian Gulf urbanism contributes profoundly to the evolving idea of the global city. The concept of the global city is not solely dependent on historical prestige, artistic legacy, or inherited cultural capital. It can be constructed through connectivity, economic clout, and visibility. Gulf cities demonstrate that global significance can emerge from deliberate planning, strategic governance, and investment in urban spectacle. These cities connect global flows of capital, labor, and knowledge, serving as nodes in international networks of finance, commerce, and tourism. Their urban forms accommodate a multicultural, expatriate-dominated population, creating cosmopolitan spaces where the city itself functions as a mediator between local ambitions and global networks.

Moreover, Persian Gulf urbanism challenges traditional assumptions about urban culture. While historic global cities evolved slowly, shaped by trade, politics, and cultural institutions over centuries, Gulf cities achieve prominence almost instantaneously through technological innovation, architectural audacity, and strategic positioning. The city becomes a deliberate statement of identity, designed to compete in a globalized urban hierarchy. In doing so, these cities expand our understanding of what a global city can be, showing that strategic urbanism, centralized governance, and economic leverage can create global relevance even in the absence of a long cultural lineage.

Ultimately, urbanism in the Persian Gulf illustrates a modern paradigm of city-making. It shows how cities can be both material and symbolic, sites of human habitation and arenas of global ambition. They are planned, governed, and transformed in ways that reflect both local imperatives and global aspirations, offering a vision of urban life that prioritizes connectivity, spectacle, and functionality. In redefining the criteria for global cityhood, Persian Gulf urbanism underscores a central lesson: in the contemporary era, the city itself can become culture, history, and ambition, crafted deliberately to resonate far beyond its physical borders.

Table Urban Development

City	Historical Development	Governance & Planning	Architecture & Urban Form	Global City Aspirations	Cultural Infrastructure	Socio-Demographics / Population Dynamics
Abu Dhabi	Small pearl-fishing settlement; rapid expansion post-oil 1960s	Centralized, royal-led planning; Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council	Mix of ultra-modern high-rises and planned waterfronts; artificial islands	Strong; financial, tourism, and political hub	Moderate; Louvre Abu Dhabi, cultural districts emerging	Predominantly expatriates; large migrant workforce, high income inequality
Dubai	Modest trading port; accelerated transformation from 1990s	Highly centralized, government-driven development	Skyscrapers, luxury malls, man-made islands; vertical and iconic urbanism	Very strong; global hub for finance, tourism, real estate	Moderate; emerging museums, some art districts, limited historic heritage	Majority expatriates; highly cosmopolitan; labor stratification pronounced
Riyadh	Historical desert settlement; became Saudi capital 1930s	Monarchical, top-down city planning; recent urban master plans	Grid-based modernist planning; suburban sprawl; gated communities	Moderate; regional political and business influence, less global visibility	Few international cultural institutions; strong religious-cultural heritage	Predominantly Saudi nationals; strict urban social segregation; rapid urban expansion
Muscat	Ancient port; continuous development over centuries	Sultanate-led planning; preservation-oriented	Low-rise, organic layouts; hillside urbanism;	Low-moderate; tourism and administration	Traditional heritage focus; forts, souks, museums	Predominantly Omani; moderate expatriate population; slower growth

			minimal skyscrapers			than Gulf peers
Sana'a	Very old city; one of the oldest continuously inhabited capitals	Weak centralized urban governance; conflict impacts	Historic mud-brick tower houses; organic street patterns	Very low; limited global visibility due to conflict	Rich heritage; UNESCO Old City, but threatened	Mostly Yemeni; urban population growth slowed by war; displacement
Tehran	Historic Persian capital; major expansion 20th century	Centralized municipal government; planned grids and boulevards	Dense urban sprawl; modernist neighborhoods; high-rise suburbs	Moderate; political and economic regional hub	Museums, galleries, opera houses; richer cultural infrastructure	Predominantly Iranian; large, young urban population; informal settlements in peripheries
Isfahan	Historic Persian capital; rich Safavid urban heritage	Municipal governance + heritage preservation	Historic urban core with squares, bridges; modern suburbs	Moderate; cultural tourism focused	Strong historic cultural infrastructure; UNESCO sites	Predominantly Iranian; smaller international migrant presence
Mashhad	Religious city; developed around Imam Reza shrine	Municipal + religious authorities	Pilgrimage-oriented infrastructure; mix of historic and modern	Low-moderate; pilgrimage tourism drives city economy	Religious-cultural infrastructure; fewer secular global institutions	Predominantly Iranian; seasonal influx of pilgrims
Basra	Port city; historically commercial; oil-driven expansion	Municipal governance; historically central, now fragmented	Dense riverfront urban core; industrial and port zones	Low-moderate; regional trade hub	Limited cultural institutions; war-damaged heritage	Predominantly Iraqi Arab; high migration and displacement due to conflict
Baghdad	Ancient imperial capital; expansion 20th century	Centralized urban governance; post-war reconstruction projects	Dense historic core with sprawling modern suburbs	Low-moderate; regional political importance	Rich cultural past, museums, universities, but damaged by war	Predominantly Iraqi; population displaced by conflict; informal urban growth
Doha	Small pearl-diving town; explosive growth post-1990	Centralized, royal-led planning	Modern skyline, artificial islands, luxury districts	Strong; global media, sports, tourism hub	Emerging museums (MIA), cultural districts	Majority expatriates; rapidly growing cosmopolitan population
Jeddah	Historic Red Sea port; expanded under Saudi modernization	Monarchical, municipal governance	Coastal city with mixed historic and modern districts; sprawling	Moderate; commercial hub with limited global cultural influence	Some historic districts (Al-Balad), growing arts and museums	Predominantly Saudi nationals; migrant labor; coastal trade-driven growth

Key Observations Across These Cities

1.   Centralized Governance Drives Rapid Transformation: Gulf cities (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha, Riyadh, Muscat) show strong top-down planning and deliberate urban branding, allowing almost instantaneous global visibility. Cities outside the Gulf (Baghdad, Basra, Sana'a, Tehran, Isfahan) evolved more organically or are constrained by politics, conflict, or heritage preservation.

2.   Urban Identity Tied to Economic Model: Oil wealth enabled Gulf cities to focus on vertical urbanism, luxury residential zones, and artificial islands, projecting global city imagery. Non-Gulf cities rely more on historical significance, regional commerce, or religious tourism.

3.   Cultural Infrastructure Is Often Secondary: Most Persian Gulf cities project global status primarily through architecture, tourism, and infrastructure rather than historic cultural institutions. Non-Gulf cities like Isfahan, Mashhad, and Tehran maintain rich cultural heritage but often lack the global economic and symbolic visibility of Gulf counterparts.

4.   Demographics Influence Urban Form: Cities dominated by expatriates (Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi) are highly cosmopolitan, with segregated labor and residential zones. Indigenous-majority cities (Riyadh, Muscat, Tehran, Isfahan) maintain more homogeneous populations with social and spatial continuity influenced by culture and religion.

5.   The Gulf Model Redefines Global City Identity: Despite limited historic or artistic heritage, Gulf cities demonstrate that urbanism, governance, and spectacle alone can position a city in the global consciousness, challenging traditional notions of cultural legitimacy in global city theory.

Analytical Discussion: Global City Aspirations vs. Cultural Depth

The axis of Global City Aspirations versus Cultural Depth reveals a fundamental tension in Middle Eastern urbanism. Cities with high cultural depth, such as Isfahan, Tehran, and Mashhad, are rich in historical continuity, architectural heritage, and institutionalized cultural infrastructure. These cities carry centuries of urban memory, from Safavid-era squares to Ottoman and Persian religious complexes, which define their identity. However, their global city aspirations are often constrained by political, economic, or infrastructural limitations. Cultural depth alone, while giving a city historical prestige, does not automatically translate into global visibility or economic prominence. In fact, many of these cities have struggled to integrate heritage with modern infrastructure at scales necessary to compete in the global urban hierarchy.

Conversely, cities with extremely high global city aspirations, notably Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha, illustrate a different logic: global status is pursued primarily through urban spectacle, infrastructure, and economic magnetism rather than historic or cultural capital. These cities invest heavily in iconic architecture, artificial islands, and megaprojects to project global visibility. Here, cultural depth is comparatively low; heritage and local traditions are often curated or symbolic rather than foundational to the urban form. Yet, these cities succeed in embedding themselves into global networks of finance, tourism, and media, demonstrating that

cultural legacy, while valuable, is not strictly necessary for attaining global prominence in the twenty-first century.

The analysis reveals a complementary yet tensioned relationship: cities like Tehran or Isfahan possess legitimacy and depth but limited mobility on the global city scale, whereas Gulf cities convert economic and architectural resources into global significance without the historical depth that traditional global cities might possess. This challenges conventional definitions of global cityhood, suggesting that in the contemporary era, symbolic and functional urbanism can substitute for cultural and historical prestige.

Analytical Discussion: Centralized Governance vs. Organic Growth

The second axis, Centralized Governance versus Organic Growth, further explains why some cities can rapidly achieve global visibility while others cannot. Cities governed through centralized, top-down authority—such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha, Riyadh, and Muscat—benefit from coherent, decisive urban planning. Governments can implement megaprojects, control zoning, and attract foreign investment with minimal procedural friction. Centralized governance allows for urban experimentation, rapid transformation, and deliberate crafting of city identity, enabling these cities to achieve global visibility almost overnight. The trade-off, however, is a degree of social stratification and sometimes limited integration with local cultural narratives. Expatriate-dominated populations and gated communities are common, highlighting how centralized governance can produce efficiency and spectacle at the cost of organic social layering.

By contrast, cities shaped by organic growth, often coupled with fragmented governance—such as Baghdad, Basra, Sana'a, and parts of Tehran—display urban forms heavily influenced by history, politics, and incremental social processes. Streets, neighborhoods, and markets grow with community needs rather than centralized visions. This produces rich cultural textures, social density, and historically grounded identity but often limits the city's ability to implement rapid transformations or compete globally. Informal settlements, irregular urban grids, and infrastructural gaps are common, reflecting the constraints and unpredictability of organic urbanism.

The Gulf city is a deliberate creation, emerging not from centuries of organic growth but from strategic vision and concentrated wealth. Its patterns are geometric, monumental, and intensely planned, reflecting a top-down urbanism that prioritizes connectivity, spectacle, and economic functionality. The identity of the Gulf city is aspirational, projecting a narrative of global relevance and modernity that often supersedes historical depth. Its feel is simultaneously cosmopolitan and artificial, blending luxury districts, high-rise skylines, and curated public spaces with an expatriate-dominated social fabric.

Expressions of the Gulf city are visible in iconic architecture, artificial islands, mega-malls, and technologically advanced infrastructure, forming a visual and symbolic language of progress. Urban life is organized around economic magnetism, tourism, and global commerce, with social stratification embedded in residential and labor patterns. Pioneers of the Gulf city include visionary rulers, royal families, and state-backed developers who orchestrated urban transformation with unprecedented speed.

Cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi exemplify this modern urbanism, using architecture and urban form as instruments of identity and global recognition. The Gulf city asserts a new kind of modernity that is constructed, performative, and highly symbolic, rather than inherited from history or culture. It challenges conventional definitions of the global city by privileging spectacle, connectivity, and economic power over centuries-old artistic or cultural prestige.

Its urban experience is intensely visual, designed to impress both residents and the global gaze, turning the city itself into a stage for modern ambition. Unlike traditional cities, where heritage and continuity define identity, the Gulf city manufactures identity through planning, governance, and high-investment design. Its roads, towers, and districts are markers of strategic intent, signaling rapid adaptability and a willingness to reshape landscapes at will. This modernity is both inclusive and exclusive, offering opportunity for global capital and talent while segregating labor and limiting historical cultural integration. Ultimately, understanding the Gulf city requires seeing it as a deliberate urban performance, a fusion of vision, governance, and wealth that creates a new urban paradigm in the twenty-first century.

Conclusive Analysis: Intersection of the Two Axes

When these two dimensions intersect, a clear pattern emerges:

• High global city aspiration + centralized governance → Rapidly emerging global hubs (Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha). These cities demonstrate that governance, economic resources, and planned urbanism can produce global visibility and functional prominence even in the absence of deep cultural roots.

• High cultural depth + organic growth → Historically and culturally rich cities (Isfahan, Mashhad, Sana'a, Baghdad). These cities embody urban identity and social continuity but are often limited in global economic integration or symbolic visibility.

• High cultural depth + centralized governance → Cities like Tehran and Muscat attempt to merge heritage with modernization, achieving moderate global prominence while preserving historical identity.

• Low cultural depth + organic growth → Rare in this region; such cities typically remain peripheral, lacking both global visibility and historical legitimacy.

This intersection demonstrates that global city status is increasingly constructed, not inherited. In the Persian Gulf, centralized governance and ambitious urbanism allow cities to bypass centuries of cultural accumulation to claim positions in global networks. Conversely, cities with organic growth retain authenticity and identity but face structural challenges in asserting themselves as nodes of global power.

Ultimately, these axes reveal that urbanism in the Middle East operates as a spectrum between elitist signaling of cultural and ideological aspiration legitimacy and functional globalism, and between organic development and centralized strategic design. Understanding a city's position along these dimensions provides a predictive framework for its trajectory in the twenty-first century urban hierarchy: centralized, aspirational cities are poised for global prominence, while

historically rich, organically grown cities maintain cultural depth and resilience but must innovate strategically to compete globally.

Gulfi Architecture influencing the world

Gulfi architecture has not only absorbed global influences but has also reshaped international design and urbanism. The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi set new standards for monumental religious architecture, combining traditional Islamic forms with modern materials and engineering. Palm Jumeirah in Dubai pioneered large-scale coastal reclamation and luxury island masterplanning, inspiring waterfront projects worldwide. The Burj Khalifa demonstrated advanced structural engineering, vertical urban living, and iconic skyline creation, influencing skyscraper design globally.

Figure Palm Jumeriha

The Museum of the Future introduced parametric design integrated with Arabic calligraphy, inspiring culturally expressive contemporary architecture . Masdar City showcased sustainable urban planning and renewable energy integration, becoming a model for climate-adapted cities internationally .

The King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center advanced desert architecture and environmental performance strategies for institutional complexes . Souk Madinat Jumeirah exemplified the blending of traditional marketplace motifs with modern mixed-use tourism, influencing retail and leisure districts globally . Gulf urbanism emphasizes spectacle, innovation, and high-investment interventions that other cities study and emulate. Collectively, these projects demonstrate the Gulf's role as a laboratory for architectural experimentation and global urban influence, bridging local culture with worldwide design trends.

The Emirates built environment reflects a complex interplay of global modernism, historical reference, nationalist ideology, and economic ambition. It sends the signal of a Kingdom that wants to be a technocratic and progressive society.

The National Museum of Qatar in Doha, designed by architect Jean Nouvel, is inspired by the desert rose crystal formation, featuring interlocking curved discs that surround the historic

Palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani, symbolically linking Qatar's past with its modern identity. Internally, the museum's open, flowing galleries guide visitors naturally through 11 immersive, multimedia-rich exhibitions, creating a dynamic, story-like experience that blends history, culture, and environment.

Figure Nmoq

The use of sand-colored concrete, natural shading, and organic forms harmonizes with the desert landscape, while interior light, materials, and spatial design make visitors feel part of the narrative. Internationally, its bold combination of sculptural form, contextual storytelling, and environmental responsiveness has influenced contemporary museum and cultural architecture by showing how buildings can embody national identity and create immersive experiences. Since opening in 2019, the museum has become a landmark example of innovative design that merges architecture, culture, and visitor experience on a global stage.

The Gulf's gift to the world is its bold experimentation in urbanism and architecture, blending tradition, technology, and spectacle. Projects like Burj Khalifa, Palm Jumeirah, and the Museum of the Future have redefined what cities can achieve in verticality, artificial landscapes, and parametric design. Gulf cities demonstrate how governance, capital, and vision can rapidly transform desert landscapes into globally influential urban centers. They offer models of climate-adapted infrastructure, luxury mixed-use development, and culturally expressive architecture that inspire cities worldwide.

To remain true to their heritage, both Qatar and the Emirates could draw lessons from Riyadh's approach to urban and architectural identity, whereas Riyadh itself, in architectonic terms, could benefit from integrating more contemporary design strategies that reflect regional diversity and modern aspirations. A sustainable urban design must balance environmental responsibility, social inclusivity, and economic viability, integrating green infrastructure, efficient transportation, and culturally sensitive architecture to create resilient, livable cities for present and future generations.

Ultimately, the Gulf shows that urban identity can be both performative and rooted in heritage, creating a new paradigm for twenty-first-century cities, characterized by iconic, culturally resonant architecture, a blend of tradition and modernity, immersive public spaces, and a strong

emphasis on narrative-driven urban experiences that project national identity on a global stage. Projects like the National Museum of Qatar exemplify this approach, where architecture becomes a medium for storytelling and cultural expression. These cities balance rapid modernization with respect for history, integrating historical landmarks within futuristic designs. Urban spaces are designed not only for function but also for symbolism and experience, making them landmarks that communicate identity. This paradigm emphasizes sustainability, environmental responsiveness, and contextual design, ensuring that growth does not erase the cultural and natural landscape. As a result, Gulf cities serve as laboratories for architectural innovation, demonstrating how heritage and spectacle can coexist to define a distinct urban character.

Comparative Urban Identity: Riyadh, Gulf Cities, and Regional Counterparts

Riyadh exemplifies a hybrid Gulf city identity. Its urbanism is centralized and top-down, driven by state planning and royal authority, much like Dubai or Abu Dhabi. Highways, government districts, and sprawling suburbs define its urban pattern, reflecting efficiency and administrative control. Unlike Dubai, Riyadh's identity is not performative or globally branded; it is functional, political, and nationalistic. The city's feel is orderly and hierarchical, embodying authority and structured modernity. Expressions of identity appear in monumental government buildings, modern business districts, and carefully zoned neighborhoods. Modernity here is deliberate and symbolic, reinforcing national identity rather than seeking global attention.

NEOM is conceived as a futuristic, sustainable, and technology-driven mega-city in northwestern Saudi Arabia, envisioned to redefine urban living, industry, and environmental stewardship. It is part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aiming to diversify the economy away from oil dependence while creating a global hub for innovation, tourism, and investment. NEOM is planned as a smart city powered entirely by renewable energy, integrating AI, robotics, autonomous transport, and cutting-edge infrastructure across sectors like energy, biotech, and entertainment. Its design emphasizes eco-friendly urbanism, with minimal environmental footprint, extensive green corridors, and high-tech sustainable communities. Ultimately, NEOM is conceived as a living laboratory for 21st-century urbanism, blending innovation, luxury, and ecological responsibility to create a model for future cities worldwide. It aspires to achieve carbon neutrality and zero-emission transportation, setting a new standard for sustainable urban living. The city seeks to diversify the economy beyond oil while experimenting with innovative governance and social models. Internationally, NEOM could inspire the future of smart cities and sustainable development. Its vision positions it as a hub for global technology, innovation, and investment. Ultimately, the success or failure of NEOM will shape Saudi Arabia's reputation and influence on the world stage, standing as either a beacon of possibility or a cautionary tale of ambition.

The King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia is a large scale, mixed use urban district envisioned as a city within a city that redefines business, lifestyle, and urban living in the Saudi capital. Spanning about 1.6 million m² and consisting of more than 90 buildings and towers designed by leading global architects, KAFD integrates office space, residences, hotels, retail, cultural venues, and public spaces into a compact, vertically layered

environment that promotes a live work play model rather than traditional segregation of functions.

Dubai and Abu Dhabi are archetypal Gulf cities. Their urban identity is constructed, performative, and aspirational, designed to capture global attention. Skyscrapers, artificial islands, and luxury districts create an urban spectacle. Governance is highly centralized, enabling rapid implementation of megaprojects. Social and residential patterns are expatriate-dominated, producing cosmopolitan but segmented communities. Modernity in these cities is performative: the city itself is the cultural expression, with architecture and infrastructure substituting for centuries of heritage.

Figure KAFD Conference Center
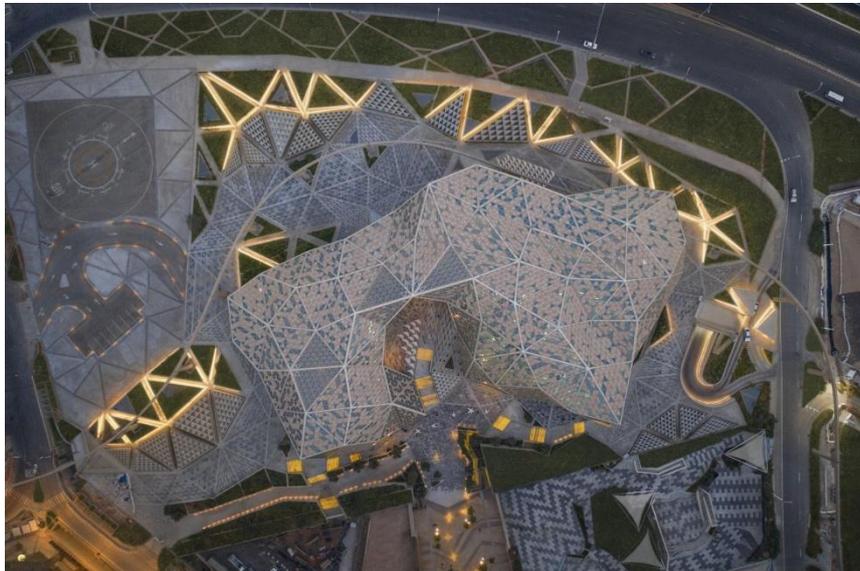
Doha shares this aspirational logic but is smaller in scale. Its identity is crafted through iconic projects like the Museum of Islamic Art and Lusail City. Centralized governance directs urban expansion and global positioning. The feel of Doha is simultaneously cosmopolitan and curated, with public spaces and districts designed to reflect global modernity. Modernity is expressed through infrastructure, cultural investments, and connectivity to international networks.

Muscat contrasts with the Gulf spectacle. Urban patterns emphasize low-rise development and integration with natural landscapes. Governance is centralized but preservation-oriented, blending modernization with historical continuity. Identity is grounded in tradition, social continuity, and heritage. Modernity exists but is subtle, expressed through infrastructure improvements and selective urban expansion rather than performative architectural statements.

Tehran represents a historically rich, organically grown city. Its patterns are a mix of planned grids and dense, informal neighborhoods. Governance is hybrid, combining municipal planning with national oversight, yet constrained by social and political complexities. Identity is deeply tied to Persian cultural heritage, historic architecture, and urban squares. The feel is dense, complex, and layered, reflecting centuries of cultural evolution. Modernity exists in

high-rise suburbs and contemporary infrastructure, but the city's character is rooted in heritage and organic urban growth rather than global spectacle.

Basra is an Iraqi port and oil city shaped largely by organic growth and fragmented governance. Urban patterns are dense along the Shatt al-Arab, with industrial and port zones dominating the landscape. Identity is tied to trade, waterway networks, and regional culture rather than global city ambitions. The feel is functional and regionally oriented, with limited symbolic urban expression. Modernity is practical and infrastructure-driven, constrained by political instability and historical legacies of conflict.

Summary

Gulf cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha leverage centralized governance to deliberately construct urban identity, projecting a performative modernity that signals global relevance. Riyadh also demonstrates centralized planning, but its priorities lie in political authority and administrative function rather than urban spectacle, producing a city that communicates order, hierarchy, and national purpose. Muscat blends modern infrastructure with careful historical preservation, creating a measured, heritage-grounded form of modernity that respects the past while accommodating contemporary needs. Tehran exemplifies a city shaped by organic growth combined with hybrid governance, where modern infrastructure coexists with dense historical layering, resulting in an urban identity rich in cultural depth. Basra represents cities where organic urbanism, regional functionality, and fragmented governance define the urban landscape, with symbolic and global ambitions playing a much smaller role. The feel of these cities spans a spectrum: from the performative spectacle and cosmopolitan energy of Dubai, to the structured authority and ordered modernity of Riyadh, to the intricate historical density of Tehran, and the practical, regionally oriented functionality of Basra. Modernity in Gulf cities is consciously constructed and performative, whereas in cities like Tehran and Basra it is adaptive and incremental, evolving within historical, cultural, and functional contexts. Social composition is a major determinant of urban identity; expatriate-heavy Gulf cities create cosmopolitan segmentation, while indigenous-majority cities retain social continuity and locally rooted urban rhythms. Expressions of urban identity are equally diverse: iconic architecture, luxury infrastructure, and urban spectacle dominate in the Gulf, while heritage preservation, public squares, and trade-oriented infrastructure define Tehran and Basra. Across the region, Gulf urbanism demonstrates a new paradigm of modernity, showing that governance, strategic planning, and concentrated capital can create global relevance even in the absence of centuries of cultural depth. The contrasts between these cities highlight the multiple ways urban identity is constructed, negotiated, and performed, offering insights into the balance between history, governance, social composition, and ambition in shaping contemporary Middle Eastern urbanism.

The EU–GCC dialogue on urbanism reflects a deliberate agenda of knowledge exchange, where both regions share experiences in city planning, sustainability, and smart infrastructure. The GCC contributes insights on rapid urban transformation, resource-driven planning, and the creation of cosmopolitan urban hubs under centralized governance. The EU brings centuries of experience in heritage preservation, integrated urban mobility, participatory planning, and balancing modernity with historical continuity.

Discussions emphasize the importance of sustainable urban development, addressing climate adaptation, energy efficiency, and public space design. Knowledge transfer is two-way, with GCC cities experimenting with European-inspired regulations for heritage districts and environmental standards. Collaborative projects explore urban resilience, affordable housing, and mixed-use development to enhance social cohesion in fast-growing cities. Intercultural dialogue underscores the role of urbanism in shaping social values, identity, and civic engagement across civilizations.

Academic exchanges, joint research, and policy workshops allow planners from both regions to compare centralized versus participatory governance models. The agenda also seeks to reconcile global city aspirations with local cultural and religious traditions, fostering urban forms that are both modern and contextually authentic. Ultimately, this dialogue positions urbanism as a bridge for inter-civilizational understanding, demonstrating how cities can embody shared ambitions while respecting unique social, cultural, and environmental realities.

15. Turkey and Persian Gulf and the Middle East

Turkey occupies a unique geopolitical position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. This location gives it strategic importance in regional politics and global trade.

Although Turkey does not border the Gulf directly, it plays an important role in Gulf security and diplomacy. Turkey's Middle East strategy has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ankara has pursued a more assertive regional policy. This approach combines diplomacy, economic outreach, and military engagement.

Turkey aims to increase its influence across the broader Middle East. The Gulf region is central to this strategy because of its energy resources and financial power.

Turkey has developed especially close ties with Qatar. The two countries cooperate in defense, trade, and investment. Turkey established a military base in Qatar to strengthen security cooperation. This partnership deepened during the Gulf diplomatic crisis of 2017. At the same time, Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia have experienced both tension and reconciliation. Disagreements over regional politics created strain in the past. However, recent years have seen efforts to normalize and improve economic ties. Relations with the United Arab Emirates have followed a similar pattern. Competition for regional influence led to diplomatic friction. Later, high-level visits and investment agreements helped restore cooperation.

Energy security is a major driver of Turkey's engagement with the Gulf. Turkey depends heavily on imported energy to fuel its economy. Strong relations with energy-producing states are therefore strategically important. Turkey also seeks to position itself as an energy transit hub between East and West. Pipelines and transport corridors are central to this ambition.

Beyond energy, trade and construction projects link Turkey with Gulf economies. Turkish companies are active in infrastructure and real estate projects in the region. Financial investments from Gulf states also support Turkey's domestic economy.

Security concerns shape Turkey's broader Middle East policy. Conflicts in neighboring countries have influenced Ankara's strategic calculations. Turkey has conducted cross-border

military operations to address perceived threats. It argues that these actions protect its national security interests. Turkey is also involved diplomatically in regional peace processes.

Balancing relations with rival regional powers remains a challenge. Turkey's foreign policy emphasizes strategic autonomy. This means reducing dependence on any single global power.

Ankara seeks flexibility in its alliances and partnerships. Soft power tools complement Turkey's hard power strategy. Humanitarian aid and development assistance expand its regional presence.

Cultural diplomacy and media outreach also project influence. Domestic politics often influence foreign policy decisions. Overall, Turkey's Gulf and Middle East strategy reflects a mix of economic ambition, security priorities, and geopolitical competition.

Bilateral relations of Turkey

Turkey – Saudi Arabia

Turkey and Saudi Arabia have increasingly sought to coordinate on regional security issues, especially regarding post conflict Syria and counterterrorism. Both capitals describe shaping a future Syria that is stable, non-threatening, and inclusive of diverse communities as a shared priority. Defence cooperation — including technology transfers and counter extremism programs — is a growing cornerstone of their strategic engagement. Saudi leaders see Turkey as a capable partner that can contribute diplomatic and military weight if coordinated carefully with Riyadh's own priorities. Joint efforts to bolster border security and reconstruction in the Levant are emerging in multilateral forums. Deepening cooperation between Ankara and Riyadh has drawn attention in regional capitals, including Israel, which watches the alliance's implications for its own security calculus. Saudi arms purchases from Turkey and shared production of military hardware reflect a diversification of Riyadh's defence partnerships. Analysts note that this Turkish Saudi axis could challenge existing Western oriented security frameworks in the Gulf. Economic links, particularly investment in infrastructure and supply chains, further bind both states' strategic interests. Overall, Ankara and Riyadh view each other as pragmatic partners in shaping a post conflict regional order.

Turkey – Egypt

Relations between Turkey and Egypt, once strained over political rivalries, have warmed markedly. After a decade of tensions following Egypt's 2013 political shifts, diplomatic representation was fully restored. Military cooperation now includes joint naval exercises — the first in thirteen years — fostering trust and interoperability. Shared strategic interests, especially opposition to unilateral regional military actions and support for ceasefires, have helped bridge past divisions. Both Ankara and Cairo oppose escalations that could further destabilise the eastern Mediterranean or Palestine. High level visits and security dialogues underscore this renaissance in relations. Analysts also see growing defence industrial collaboration, including joint production projects and technology exchange. Egypt's involvement in Turkish aerospace and defence initiatives signals strategic depth beyond mere diplomatic thaw. Coordinated policies toward Libya and Sudan add further layers to the

Turkey–Egypt relationship. The renewed cooperation contributes to a broader realignment of Middle Eastern state relations.

Turkey – Iran

Turkey's relationship with Iran is complex, balancing cooperation with competition. Historically, economic ties — notably trade and energy transit — have kept Ankara and Tehran engaged. Both states participate in multilateral discussions on regional stability that include Russia and Arab actors. However, they often find themselves on opposing sides in conflicts such as Syria, where Iran supports different factions than Turkey. Ankara is wary of Tehran's influence over Iraq and its alignment with Damascus' former regime. At the same time, Turkey maintains a pragmatic dialogue with Iran, especially on border security and refugee issues. Economic cooperation continues despite geopolitical frictions, and both capitals sometimes coordinate on regional diplomacy. Tehran and Ankara, while not close allies, recognise the value of negotiated engagement to avoid escalation in shared neighbourhoods. Their relationship reflects a broader Middle East balance of power that resists full alignment with any single external bloc. Turkey aims to engage Iran without compromising its own strategic autonomy.

Turkey – Israel

Turkey's relations with Israel have been strained by disagreements over the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and regional dynamics. Ankara has strongly criticised Israeli military actions in Gaza and reduced trade and diplomatic engagement. Amid tensions, both countries have nonetheless held technical talks to prevent military misunderstandings, particularly in Syria's airspace. These deconfliction mechanisms aim to avoid accidental clashes between Turkish and Israeli forces operating near Syrian territory. Israel remains sensitive to Turkey's growing influence in Syria and Lebanon, seeing it as a security concern. Turkey's vocal support for Palestinian rights and calls for ceasefires also differentiate Ankara's stance from Israel's approach. Diplomatic and military channels remain open in limited form to manage practical regional challenges. Nevertheless, full normalization of Turkey–Israel relations has not been achieved. Both sides recognise the need to avoid direct confrontation despite political disagreements. The future of bilateral ties will likely depend on broader regional developments and negotiated compromises.

Turkey – Syria

Turkey's involvement in neighboring Syria has been a central pillar of its Middle East strategy. Ankara's primary goals include securing its borders and preventing safe havens for armed groups it views as threats. Recent Syrian moves to integrate Kurdish forces into state structures have drawn Turkish attention and cautious approval. Turkey has been deeply involved in negotiating ceasefires and advocating for inclusive political settlements. Following the fall of former leadership in Damascus, Turkey is now engaging with the interim government. Agreements include enhanced defence cooperation and security support to stabilise contested regions. Turkey seeks to limit the influence of both Iranian and other external actors in Syrian affairs. It also aims to facilitate the return of refugees and the reconstruction of war torn areas. Syrian reconstruction and governance outcomes will have long term implications for Turkish

border security. Turkey continues to balance diplomatic engagement, military presence, and negotiations to shape a Syrian settlement aligned with its strategic interests.

Implications for the EU and US

Turkey's growing influence in the Middle East presents both opportunities and challenges for the European Union. Its position as a regional power means that EU security and economic interests are increasingly affected by Ankara's policies. Turkey's involvement in Syria impacts EU concerns over migration and refugee flows. Stable borders and reduced conflict near Turkey could help the EU manage migration pressure more effectively. Conversely, Turkish military interventions may exacerbate instability and increase refugee numbers. The EU must balance support for Turkey's economic integration with criticism of human rights and democratic backsliding.

Energy security is another key dimension; Turkey's role as a transit hub affects European energy diversification strategies. Pipeline politics and access to Middle Eastern energy resources are directly influenced by Ankara's relations with Gulf states and Iran. Turkey's rapprochement with Egypt and Saudi Arabia could shift regional trade patterns in ways that affect European markets.

At the same time, closer Turkish-Gulf ties may challenge EU influence in the region, particularly in diplomacy and conflict resolution.

For the United States, Turkey remains a critical NATO ally with strategic geographic significance. U.S. defense planners must account for Turkish policies in Syria, Iraq, and the eastern Mediterranean when coordinating operations. Turkey's engagement with Iran and its selective cooperation with Russia complicate U.S. regional strategy. American efforts to contain Iranian influence may be influenced by Turkey's pragmatic engagement with Tehran. Turkey's oscillating relations with Israel and Gulf states require the U.S. to manage multilateral alliances carefully. Ankara's defense procurement from non-NATO sources introduces questions about interoperability and trust within the alliance.

The EU and U.S. share concerns over Turkey's assertive regional ambitions, but their approaches differ due to proximity and trade ties. Economic sanctions or incentives may be tools to influence Turkish policy, but they risk pushing Ankara toward alternative partners. At the same time, Turkey's mediation capacity in regional disputes can benefit both the EU and the U.S. if leveraged strategically. Overall, Turkey's Middle East strategy is a double-edged sword for Western powers, offering both leverage and uncertainty in regional security, energy, and diplomacy.

On Israel, the EU anticipates normalization of security and commercial relations between Tel Aviv and Istanbul on terms to be decided in the context of Erdogan's mercurial leadership style, comparable to the potential of the situation and the pragmatic and power-oriented ways of Ankara. This does require the EU to partner up. The first steps have already been taken in Gaza and could be undertaken in the all-contestants transition group in Syria as well.

Turkey's Evolving Foreign Trade

Turkey's foreign trade is diverse, combining industrial goods, textiles, agricultural products, and energy resources. Major exports include automotive products, machinery, textiles, iron and steel, chemicals, and agricultural goods. Turkey's imports focus on energy products, machinery, intermediate goods, and consumer products. Crude oil, natural gas, and coal make up a significant portion of imports.

Machinery and industrial equipment are imported mainly from Europe and Asia.

The European Union is Turkey's largest trading partner, with Germany, Italy, and the UK leading imports and exports. Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, UAE, and Saudi Arabia are key export markets for machinery, textiles, and construction materials. China, India, and Japan import industrial products, electronics, and machinery from Turkey.

The United States is a growing market for Turkish vehicles, machinery, and steel.

Imports from China dominate electronics and consumer goods, while Europe supplies machinery and chemicals. Turkey's FDI inflows are concentrated in manufacturing, energy, financial services, construction, and technology sectors. The automotive, chemicals, and machinery industries attract the largest share of foreign investment.

Renewable energy and fossil fuel projects receive significant funding from Europe and Gulf states. Banking, insurance, and fintech sectors attract investors from Europe, the Middle East, and the US. Construction and real estate projects, including infrastructure development, are largely funded by Gulf and European investors. Technology and telecommunications are emerging as important sectors for foreign investment. European countries, particularly Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK, dominate FDI in manufacturing, finance, and infrastructure.

Middle Eastern investors from the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia focus on energy, construction, and real estate. Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea invest in automotive and technology industries. North American investment, mainly from the US, supports technology, finance, and industrial machinery sectors.

Turkey occupies a strategic location connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. It is a major exporter of automotive products, machinery, textiles, steel, chemicals, and agricultural goods. Its imports focus on energy, machinery, intermediate goods, and consumer products. Europe is Turkey's largest trading partner, followed by the Middle East, Asia, and North America.

Turkey attracts foreign direct investment mainly in manufacturing, energy, finance, construction, and technology. European countries are the largest investors, with the Middle East, Asia, and the US also contributing. Turkey's Middle East strategy combines diplomacy, economic engagement, and military involvement. It maintains close ties with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt for security and trade cooperation. Relations with Iran are pragmatic, balancing collaboration and competition in energy and regional politics. Relations with Israel are complex, involving limited cooperation but ongoing political tensions. Turkey is actively involved in Syria to secure borders, manage refugees, and influence regional outcomes.

Figure
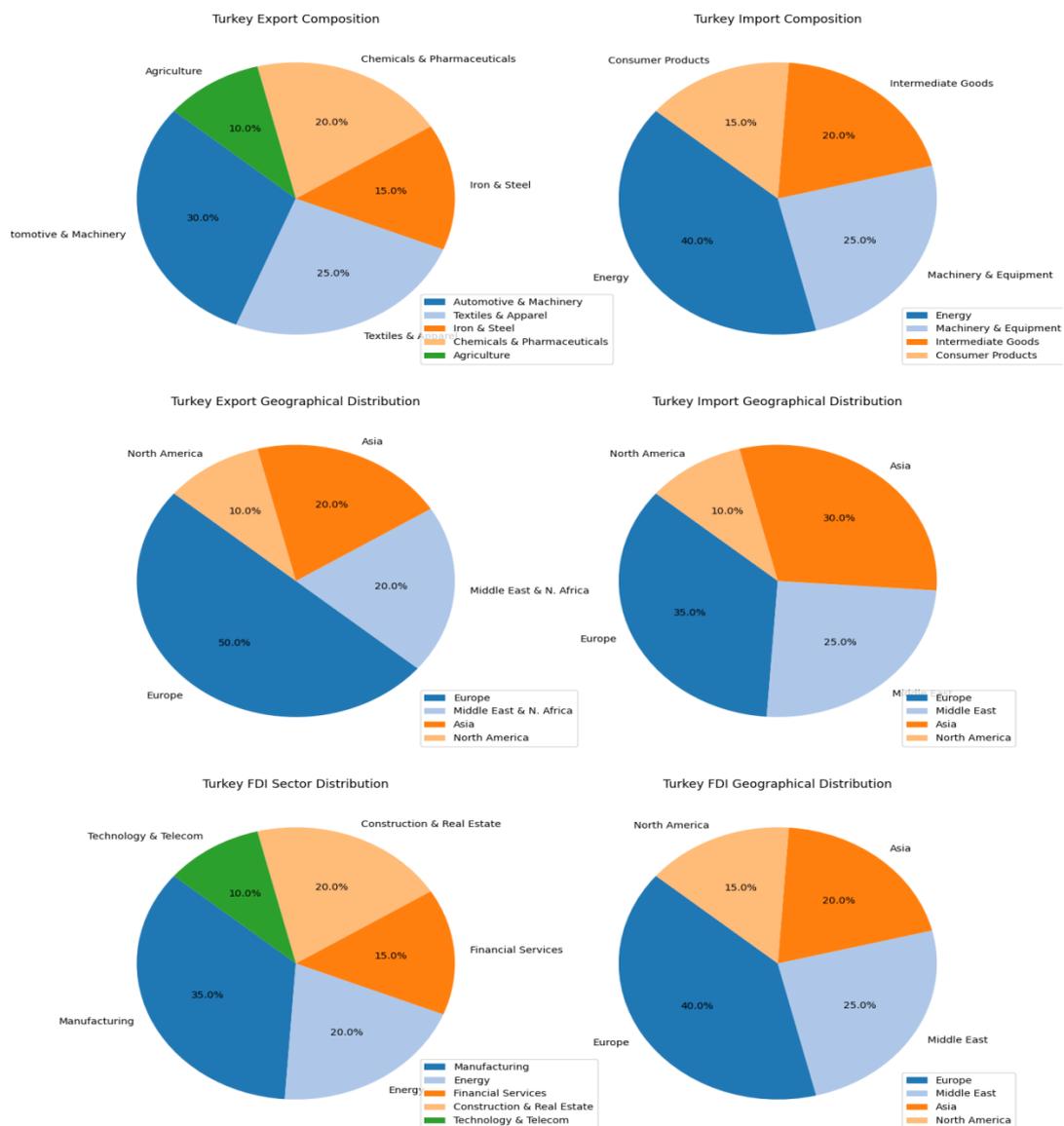
Its geographic position allows it to serve as a trade and energy hub connecting the Middle East and Europe. Turkey's military and diplomatic initiatives give it significant regional influence and mediation capacity. Challenges include balancing relations with major powers, managing internal economic pressures, and regional instability.Overall, Turkey is a key pivot state whose trade, FDI, and foreign policy make it central to Middle Eastern and global strategy.

On a net balance, Turkey's role as the EU's bridge will be a success, so long as it promotes shared interests and common trading positions in the region, without ignoring strengthened governance and more pluralism in policy-making, even as organized crime is fought with a good deal more energy and determination.

ADDED VALUE OF THE EU TO TURKEY

The added value to Turkey of EU Middle East strategies, in turn, will be determined by the skill and ability of Brussels in balancing regional diplomacy, promoting economic cooperation, and coordinating security initiatives. Effective EU engagement can enhance Turkey's access to investment, trade opportunities, and political support in conflict resolution.

Brussels' capacity to mediate between competing Middle Eastern actors will influence Turkey's ability to leverage its geographic and strategic position. If the EU successfully integrates Turkey into regional initiatives, Ankara can strengthen its role as a trade and energy hub linking Europe and the Middle East. Conversely, misalignment or inconsistent policies from Brussels could limit the benefits Turkey derives from EU-backed stabilization efforts. Cooperative EU strategies in areas such as counterterrorism, migration management, and reconstruction will reinforce Turkey's security and economic objectives.

Turkey's engagement with the Gulf, Iran, and North Africa will be more effective if EU support provides legitimacy and resources for joint projects. The EU's ability to maintain dialogue with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern powers will also affect Turkey's diplomatic maneuvering. Funding for infrastructure, energy, and trade projects coordinated by the EU can enhance Turkish FDI inflows and export opportunities. Brussels' credibility and consistency in conflict mediation, particularly in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, will shape Turkey's influence in these areas.

EU–Turkey cooperation can reduce friction with Washington by presenting a unified Western approach to the Middle East. Skillful EU strategies can help Turkey balance its autonomy with alignment on shared security and economic priorities. The success of EU programs in the region will directly impact Turkey's ability to leverage regional partnerships. Ultimately, the added value for Turkey hinges on Brussels' strategic vision, diplomatic skill, and capacity to deliver tangible economic and political benefits. Well-crafted EU Middle East strategies can thus turn Turkey's geographical and economic advantages into concrete regional influence and stability for both.

To remain attractive to the EU, Turkey must maintain macroeconomic stability, ensure a predictable business environment, and strengthen the rule of law and institutional transparency. It should continue to align its trade regulations and standards with EU norms to facilitate exports and investment. Investing in infrastructure, technology, and human capital will enhance Turkey's competitiveness as a gateway between Europe and the Middle East. Sustaining political stability and reducing policy uncertainty are critical for maintaining investor confidence. Turkey should actively engage in multilateral cooperation on regional security, migration, and counterterrorism, demonstrating reliability as a partner. Maintaining constructive diplomatic relations with EU member states and neighboring countries strengthens its strategic position. Continuing reforms in areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and corporate governance will signal commitment to EU values. Diversifying foreign investment and trade partnerships while retaining alignment with EU priorities enhances resilience. Strengthening environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards will make Turkish projects more attractive to European investors. Ultimately, Turkey must balance regional autonomy with alignment on shared economic, political, and security priorities to remain a valuable partner to the EU.

It is like the man who loses his arm to discover the world has changed not realizing it is him who has a different perception of reality , while the neighbourhood has gone largely from stable to A series of weakened authoritarian regimes. The plan is now to restore governmental order in Club Med and then to start competing with China. Next the root causes of conflict must be addressed and then peace-building begin.

Once the EU influence is strengthened in the Club Med countries, the promotion of EU values will become increasingly important, adapted to the pace and rhythm of development in the Southern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East. A stronger economic presence allows the EU to influence governance, transparency, and social reforms in partner countries. By linking trade incentives with institutional and regulatory improvements, the EU can encourage sustainable development aligned with European standards. Economic integration creates channels for cultural exchange, education, and capacity-building initiatives, enhancing mutual understanding. Adapting EU values to local development rhythms ensures that reforms are realistic, context-sensitive, and politically feasible.

This approach helps prevent backlash or resistance while promoting human rights, rule of law, and inclusive economic growth. EU-backed infrastructure and investment projects can serve as tangible demonstrations of these values in action. Enhanced trade with the southern Mediterranean strengthens regional stability, indirectly supporting EU security and migration objectives. Coordinated EU engagement can help harmonize standards across the Mediterranean, facilitating smoother trade and regulatory cooperation.

Ultimately, a strong economic foundation allows the EU to promote its values more effectively, making its partnerships in the region mutually beneficial and sustainable.

Outlook for EU-Turkey & Gulfi relations

In the short term, Turkey's EU accession negotiations would likely increase investor confidence in the region, as GCC states may view Turkey as a more integrated European partner. Trade flows could become more predictable, facilitating short-term investment and joint ventures between GCC and Turkish firms. GCC countries may strengthen diplomatic engagement with both Turkey and the EU to protect their strategic and economic interests. Immediate adjustments in tariffs, customs, and regulatory standards may affect energy exports and industrial supply chains with Turkey.

In the medium term, GCC countries could deepen economic integration with Turkey through enhanced trade agreements and sectoral partnerships, particularly in energy, finance, and construction. Increased EU oversight and standards in Turkey may encourage GCC investors to adopt EU-compliant practices, improving regional business governance. Turkey's EU membership may reshape regional alliances, prompting GCC states to adjust their political and security strategies in the Middle East. Collaboration on infrastructure, technology, and renewable energy projects could expand as Turkey gains access to EU funding and programs.

In the long term, Turkey's accession could position it as a gateway between the EU and GCC markets, enhancing the GCC's trade and investment opportunities in Europe. GCC states may leverage Turkey's EU membership to strengthen strategic dialogue with Brussels on Middle Eastern issues. Regional stability could improve if Turkey serves as a mediator between Europe

and Middle Eastern actors, reducing conflicts that impact GCC interests. The GCC may benefit from a larger, more integrated economic zone, with Turkey facilitating EU-GCC cooperation on energy, technology, and trade. Over time, Turkish EU membership could reshape competitive dynamics in the region, encouraging GCC countries to innovate and diversify their economic portfolios.

Turkey, Iran, and Israel are widely considered the Middle East states with the strongest state apparatuses, characterized by effective institutions, bureaucratic reach, and security capacity. Turkey combines a centralized bureaucracy with a modern military, allowing it to project power regionally and implement complex domestic and foreign policies. Iran maintains resilience through formal institutions and parallel structures like the IRGC, enabling regional influence via proxy networks despite economic and political constraints. Israel's state strength is rooted in advanced technology, intelligence capabilities, and cohesive governance, allowing rapid mobilization and strategic planning.

By contrast, many GCC states rely on monarchical authority, wealth, and foreign security support, with less institutional depth and bureaucratic reach compared to these three states. Strong state apparatuses in Turkey, Iran, and Israel give them leverage in regional diplomacy, trade, and security, shaping interactions with the GCC. GCC countries engage with these states carefully, balancing strategic partnerships with economic cooperation while managing security and political risks. Over time, the relative institutional strength of Turkey, Iran, and Israel influences GCC policies, particularly in trade, defense coordination, and regional alliances.

16. Interdependencies in the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf riparian states—Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman—are connected through multiple layers of interdependence, shaped by geography, resources, and regional economies. Joint infrastructure projects such as cross-border highways, rail links, ports, and industrial zones (e.g., Iraq-UAE logistics corridors, UAE–Oman road networks) are gradually linking regional markets, facilitating the movement of goods and services while reducing reliance on external hubs. In the labor and knowledge mobility sector, there is significant seasonal and professional migration, particularly from Iran and Iraq into GCC countries, while Gulf states host regional training and education hubs that could be leveraged for knowledge sharing and skills development across the region.

Energy integration remains crucial: pipelines, electricity grids, and coordinated oil and gas exports highlight both competition and potential cooperation, while water and environmental sectors—including shared aquifers, desalination plants, and pollution management in the Gulf—underscore the mutual vulnerability of riparian states to climate stress and scarcity. Despite political tensions, these sectors present opportunities for economic interdependence, as cross-border projects in energy, water, and environmental management can create shared benefits and stability.

Water scarcity and desertification in the Persian Gulf constitute critical and intertwined environmental, economic, and security challenges for the region. The Gulf is naturally arid, with minimal freshwater resources and extremely high evaporation rates due to high temperatures. Annual rainfall is often below 100 millimeters in many areas, making surface

water virtually nonexistent in much of the region. Groundwater aquifers are heavily relied upon, but decades of over-extraction—combined with natural salinity and limited recharge—have caused rapid depletion, subsidence, and declining water quality.

Desertification further compounds these challenges. The region's fragile soils are highly susceptible to wind erosion, overgrazing, and unsustainable land use practices. Urban expansion, infrastructure development, and industrialization accelerate the spread of barren land and reduce the ability of natural ecosystems to retain water and soil nutrients. Climate change intensifies these pressures by increasing temperatures, altering precipitation patterns, and exacerbating drought frequency.

The consequences are multifaceted. Water scarcity constrains agriculture and food security, forcing countries to rely heavily on imports and expensive desalination plants. Desertification reduces arable land, impacts biodiversity, and contributes to dust storms that affect human health and urban air quality. Economically, maintaining water security requires massive investments in desalination, water transport, and conservation infrastructure, which consume energy and increase the region's carbon footprint.

From a security perspective, water scarcity and desertification are destabilizing forces. They can heighten competition over limited freshwater resources, create social stress through population displacement, and amplify regional tensions if shared water basins are contested. Gulf states have responded with a combination of technological solutions, including large-scale desalination, water recycling, and smart irrigation systems, as well as regional cooperation efforts. However, these measures are costly and often energy-intensive, making long-term sustainability a persistent challenge.

In short, water scarcity and desertification in the Persian Gulf are not just environmental problems; they are strategic, economic, and societal vulnerabilities that shape policy, influence regional stability, and require integrated management across national borders.

Trade interdependencies in the Gulf remain relatively limited, yet they carry significant potential for growth. Currently, intra-GCC trade accounts for roughly 8 to 10 percent of total trade, reflecting both geographic proximity and historical economic linkages. While this share is modest, it has been gradually increasing as member states diversify their economies beyond oil and strengthen regional supply chains. Trade between GCC countries and Iran remains intermittent, influenced by geopolitical tensions, sanctions, and shifting regional alliances. Nevertheless, there are areas of steady growth, particularly in construction materials, industrial goods, and agricultural products, where demand aligns with Iran's production capabilities. Non-oil sectors are increasingly facilitating cross-border exchanges, supported by logistics networks and transport corridors that can reduce costs and increase efficiency. Financial cooperation, banking linkages, and joint ventures further encourage trade flows, while regulatory harmonization could enhance predictability for investors and exporters. Energy-related interconnections, such as electricity grids and petrochemical collaboration, also underpin potential complementarities. Overall, these emerging trade patterns signal that, despite political and regulatory hurdles, economic interdependence could expand, creating incentives for dialogue and regional cooperation. Strengthening these trade links could act as

a stabilizing force, promoting both economic resilience and strategic connectivity across the Gulf.

Expanding joint infrastructure, energy, and environmental projects has the potential to act as a powerful catalyst for increased trade and deeper institutional collaboration across the Gulf. By developing shared transport networks, integrated power grids, and coordinated water and environmental management systems, states can create practical frameworks for mutual economic growth while reducing operational redundancies and transaction costs. Such initiatives not only strengthen physical connectivity but also build trust and experience in cross-border project management, laying the groundwork for broader policy harmonization.

Migration in the region reflects a dual dynamic of opportunity and constraint. Millions of workers move across Gulf states to meet labor demands, yet permanent mobility remains limited, and the circulation of expertise tends to be concentrated in specific sectors, such as energy, education, engineering, and high-tech industries. Knowledge transfer is often transactional and project-based rather than systemic, reducing the potential for sustained regional capacity building. Policies that facilitate structured cross-border labor mobility, targeted professional exchanges, and sectoral training programs—particularly in technical, environmental, and renewable energy sectors—could significantly enhance regional human capital. When combined with joint infrastructure and environmental initiatives, such labor and knowledge flows could foster interconnected economic ecosystems, reduce dependency on external expertise, and promote shared resilience in the face of climate, energy, and technological challenges. Ultimately, integrating physical, human, and institutional connectivity offers a pathway toward a more cohesive and mutually reinforcing Gulf economic and development strategy.

Economically and environmentally, greater integration in energy, water, and environmental sectors would reduce risks from climate change, supply disruptions, or resource scarcity. A Food-Water-Energy Program in the Persian Gulf could address the region's interlinked resource vulnerabilities by promoting climate-resilient agriculture, water-efficient irrigation, and desalination technologies. Integrating renewable energy, particularly solar and wind, would power these systems sustainably while reducing carbon footprints. The program could foster regional cooperation through shared food reserves, joint water infrastructure, and coordinated energy management. Cross-border training and knowledge exchange would strengthen human capital in agriculture, water management, and renewable energy sectors. Overall, such an initiative would enhance food and water security, ensure energy reliability, and promote long-term socioeconomic and environmental resilience across the Gulf.

Food conservation in the extreme heat of the Persian Gulf adumbrates a set of pressing challenges and strategic priorities for the region. High temperatures, low humidity, and limited freshwater make traditional storage and preservation difficult, increasing post-harvest losses and reducing the shelf life of perishable goods. This situation highlights the need for innovative storage technologies, such as climate-controlled warehouses, cold chains, and solar-powered refrigeration, to maintain food quality. It also underscores the importance of reducing waste, optimizing supply chains, and promoting local production of heat-resilient crops. Ultimately, addressing food conservation in the Gulf's harsh climate is central to ensuring food security,

economic efficiency, and sustainable resource management in a region vulnerable to environmental stress and import dependence.

Politically, these shared stakes could serve as a foundation for confidence-building measures and mechanisms to mitigate disputes among Gulf states. By highlighting common vulnerabilities—such as water scarcity, energy dependency, and food security—policymakers are incentivized to cooperate rather than confront, creating a practical rationale for dialogue. Joint projects in infrastructure, energy, and environmental management can reinforce this functional interdependence, as states recognize that collective solutions are more efficient and resilient than unilateral approaches. Over time, repeated collaboration fosters trust, strengthens institutional linkages, and reduces the likelihood of miscalculation in times of tension. Such interdependence also provides a buffer against external pressures, as cohesive regional policies make the Gulf more resilient to global economic or geopolitical shocks. Shared stakes in strategic sectors can encourage transparency in decision-making and greater information-sharing among governments, which further stabilizes the political environment. Moreover, successful cooperation in technical and environmental domains can spill over into broader policy alignment, gradually building a culture of regional problem-solving. Ultimately, linking political stability to practical, mutual benefits transforms interdependence from a theoretical concept into a tangible driver of security and prosperity across the Gulf.

In short, the Persian Gulf riparian states are linked across infrastructure, labor, energy, water, and environmental sectors, but these connections remain fragmented and underexploited. Expanding joint projects and mobility frameworks could enhance trade, strengthen regional resilience, and align mutual interests, potentially transforming the Gulf into a cohesive, interdependent economic and environmental network.

17. Regional State Strategies

The Persian Gulf is a geostrategic corridor that links the riparian states to global trade routes and regional markets. Its importance derives from energy resources, maritime chokepoints, and population and infrastructure hubs that shape economic and security priorities. Saudi Arabia envisions itself as a regional hub connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe while diversifying its economy and reducing dependence on hydrocarbons.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's long-term strategy is anchored in its Vision 2030, which explicitly positions the Kingdom as a global investment powerhouse designed to stimulate economic growth, diversify revenues, and reduce dependence on hydrocarbons. The vision frames Saudi Arabia's strategic geographic location as a gateway linking Asia, Europe, and Africa, emphasizing the country's potential to serve as a global hub for trade, investment, and logistics. By leveraging its proximity to key maritime routes, including the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf, and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Kingdom seeks to become an epicenter of international commerce and a pivotal node in global supply chains. Vision 2030 also focuses heavily on human capital development, prioritizing education reform, vocational training, and the creation of dynamic employment opportunities to equip the Saudi workforce for a knowledge- and innovation-based economy. Stimulating private sector growth is a central objective, supported by regulatory

reforms, public-private partnerships, and investment incentives designed to attract multinational corporations and startups alike. Infrastructure modernization forms another core pillar, with large-scale projects in ports, airports, railways, and logistics networks aimed at connecting domestic markets with regional and international trade corridors.

State officials report measurable progress in these areas, including rising contributions of non-oil sectors to GDP and the establishment of hundreds of regional headquarters for multinational companies in Riyadh and other economic zones. Energy strategy complements these ambitions, balancing continued hydrocarbon production with investments in renewables, green hydrogen, and carbon management technologies. In addition, social and cultural reforms, including increased public participation and tourism initiatives, aim to enhance the Kingdom's soft power and global brand. Overall, Saudi Arabia's approach integrates economic diversification, strategic connectivity, human capital development, and infrastructural modernization to secure long-term regional and global influence.

Iraq

Iraq is pursuing its long-term strategic vision under Vision 2050 and the National Development Plan, emphasizing infrastructure modernization, economic diversification, and enhanced regional connectivity. Baghdad seeks to transform Iraq into a major transit hub linking the Persian Gulf with Turkey, Europe, and broader Eurasian markets, positioning the country as a critical node in Asia–Europe trade flows. Central to this vision is the Development Road corridor, combined with the expansion of the Grand Faw Port, which together are expected to handle up to twenty percent of regional trade while generating millions of jobs in logistics, technology, and sustainable sectors. Iraq's leadership is focused on reducing long-term dependence on hydrocarbons by integrating the economy into broader regional supply chains and promoting industrial, agricultural, and service sector growth. Investments in digital infrastructure, energy networks, and transportation corridors are paired with policies to attract domestic and foreign investment, foster entrepreneurship, and support small and medium-sized enterprises. Regional economic integration is a priority, with Baghdad seeking closer ties to Gulf states, Turkey, and Central Asia through trade agreements, joint projects, and logistics partnerships. Sustainable development objectives are embedded into planning, with attention to water management, environmental protection, and resilient urban growth. Human capital development is central, emphasizing education reform, workforce skill enhancement, and knowledge transfer to support long-term competitiveness. Security stabilization and governance reforms are treated as prerequisites for economic and infrastructural projects to ensure their continuity and effectiveness. In sum, Iraq's strategy combines trade facilitation, infrastructure expansion, economic diversification, and regional integration to secure a durable position in both the Gulf and Eurasian economic landscapes.

Iran's regional strategy communicates both security competition and conditional cooperation strategies. Tehran has articulated the Hormuz Peace Initiative (HOPE) — also described as the "Coalition of Hope" — as a proposal for collective peace, stability, and cooperation among Persian Gulf states, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman, emphasizing mutual respect, peaceful dispute resolution, freedom of navigation, and energy security while calling for regional ownership of security challenges rather than reliance on external powers. Iranian leaders at the United Nations and in diplomatic consultations have framed HOPE as a platform

for reducing tensions, anchoring cooperation on principles of non intervention, and jointly managing energy and maritime security. Tehran's diplomatic outreach on HOPE has at times been met with receptive initial reactions from regional governments, indicating a conceptual opening for dialogue, though concrete implementation remains limited. Iran simultaneously sustains influence networks across Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE that it views as strategic levers within broader competition with Gulf states.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE pursues a foreign and economic strategy grounded in economic diversification, regional connectivity, and soft power projection. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are developed as hubs for investment, logistics, and technological innovation. Sovereign wealth funds and mega-projects reinforce its role as a regional financial and commercial linchpin. The UAE seeks to export not only hydrocarbons but also digital, financial, and logistical services. It engages deeply in Gulf economic integration frameworks to support regional trade. Strategic partnerships with India, Europe, and Asia expand its global economic footprint. Soft power initiatives, including cultural diplomacy and hosting international events, enhance its regional and global influence. Security policy is coordinated with GCC allies while maintaining independent capabilities to safeguard trade corridors. Energy policy combines renewable investments with traditional hydrocarbon exports to ensure long-term resilience. Overall, the UAE integrates economic foresight, global partnerships, and regional connectivity to anchor its leadership role in the Gulf.

Oman

Oman's strategy emphasizes strategic neutrality, dialogue facilitation, and mediation between rival actors. Muscat positions itself as a constructive interlocutor engaging both Iran and Gulf states. It prioritizes maritime security, trade facilitation, and regional stability through balanced diplomacy. Oman has played key roles in supporting processes such as the Iran nuclear negotiations. Its neutral posture enables it to act as a broker in contested geopolitical disputes. Economic policy complements diplomacy, focusing on trade corridors and logistics to strengthen regional linkages. Oman leverages its geographic position at the Strait of Hormuz for both security and commercial influence. Humanitarian and development initiatives reinforce its image as a cooperative regional actor. Military policy is modest and defensive, designed to avoid entanglement while safeguarding sovereignty. Overall, Oman blends neutrality, mediation, and pragmatic engagement to navigate a complex Persian Gulf landscape.

Bahrain

Bahrain aligns closely with the GCC security and defense architecture, particularly with Saudi Arabia. It prioritizes collective Gulf mechanisms to address internal stability and external threats. Manama anchors its foreign policy within GCC frameworks for deterrence and regional cohesion. Its strategic approach emphasizes defense integration and shared security planning. Bahrain leverages institutional ties and public diplomacy to reinforce Gulf unity. Economic policy complements security priorities, focusing on finance, logistics, and regional trade integration. Bahrain engages with external powers primarily through GCC channels,

maintaining alignment with regional consensus. Social and governance policies are intertwined with stability considerations, reflecting the state's security-centric orientation. Investment and innovation strategies aim to diversify the economy while maintaining strategic alignment. Overall, Bahrain's approach reflects cautious, alliance-driven integration within Gulf regional structures.

Qatar

Qatar pursues a distinctive diplomatic strategy combining independent engagement, mediation, and strategic branding. Doha maintains robust ties with global powers while engaging regional actors, including Iran. Its foreign policy emphasizes conflict resolution and regional stability through dialogue and mediation. Qatar leverages its strategic location and wealth to enhance international influence. Autonomy is reinforced through economic independence and sovereign investment initiatives. It plays a consistent role in mediating regional conflicts, including intra-Gulf disputes. Doha balances regional partnerships with global engagement to protect strategic freedom. Cultural, media, and soft power instruments strengthen its diplomatic profile. Security policy is cautious yet flexible, ensuring operational autonomy while contributing to Gulf cooperation narratives. Overall, Qatar's strategy integrates mediation, autonomy, and global partnerships to navigate regional complexities.

Figure KSA-Q8 – region
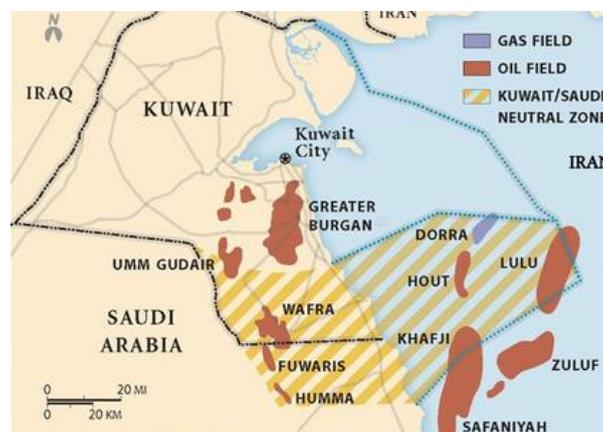
Source: Sayegh

Kuwait's Persian Gulf strategy focuses on maintaining strategic neutrality while balancing relations with regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran. It emphasizes multilateral engagement through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to strengthen security and economic integration. Kuwait invests in robust defense and crisis preparedness, often collaborating with US and Western partners for deterrence without provoking regional tensions. Economic diversification, particularly in finance, trade, and energy, supports resilience against oil market volatility. Kuwait leverages humanitarian diplomacy and mediation to position itself as a constructive actor in regional conflicts. Infrastructure projects, including energy and transport linkages, aim to deepen integration with neighbors while enhancing domestic development. Kuwait encourages knowledge and labor mobility within the Gulf to support human capital growth and regional cohesion. Environmental and water security initiatives are integrated into

its long-term strategic planning, given the region's resource vulnerabilities. Kuwait maintains flexible foreign partnerships, allowing engagement with emerging powers while protecting sovereignty. Overall, its strategy combines cautious diplomacy, economic foresight, and multilateral collaboration to navigate a complex Persian Gulf landscape.

At the multilateral level, the Gulf Cooperation Council's collective security objectives articulate evolving cooperative frameworks that include peaceful dispute resolution, engagement with Iran, and support for regional economic integration, signaling recognition among member states that shared internal stability, energy transition imperatives, and infrastructure connectivity increasingly require collaborative approaches spanning diplomacy, economics, and security cooperation.

Together these strategic orientations show how the Persian Gulf littoral states are balancing sovereignty and competition with selective cooperation: Saudi Arabia and the UAE emphasize connectivity and diversification; Iraq seeks to reintegrate itself as a regional corridor; Iran attempts to frame cooperative security through HOPE; Oman champions mediation; Bahrain anchors within GCC defense integration; and Qatar navigates tensions through independent diplomacy and mediation openings — all within a geopolitical landscape where multilateral cooperation is incrementally gaining currency in response to shared economic, security, and environmental challenges.

Intra-Gulf trade remains underdeveloped but has potential to expand through harmonized customs, logistics, and regulatory frameworks. Labor and knowledge mobility can strengthen human capital and technical capacity while promoting regional integration. Shared vulnerabilities in energy, water, and the environment create incentives for cross-border collaboration. Maritime security, including freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, is a shared concern that can drive cooperative initiatives. Energy cooperation is evolving toward renewable integration, carbon management, and grid interconnection across the Gulf. Joint infrastructure projects, including ports, rail, and industrial corridors, embed interdependence in tangible ways. Education and technical training programs facilitate knowledge exchange and workforce development across riparian states. Informal dialogues among experts, academics, and business networks reduce mistrust and identify practical areas for cooperation.

Track-two and track-one-and-a-half diplomacy can complement formal agreements and create policy convergence. Memoranda of understanding can codify operational cooperation in energy, water, and environmental sectors. Regional institutions and councils provide mechanisms to monitor implementation and assess progress. Gradual successes in low-politics sectors can expand confidence for cooperation in sensitive domains such as security and energy. Strategic sequencing begins with technical collaboration and builds toward multilateral integration. Confidence-building initiatives reduce perceived risks and enhance predictability in regional relations. Cross-border environmental monitoring and disaster response serve as entry points for practical collaboration. Economic diversification reduces reliance on external trade and strengthens internal resilience. Gulf states increasingly align infrastructure development with regional trade and connectivity objectives. Investment in smart ports, digital logistics, and industrial zones enhances intra-regional trade efficiency.

Shared water resources and desalination projects highlight the interdependence of ecological systems. Climate adaptation initiatives promote resilience and create avenues for joint technical collaboration. Regional energy transition policies create incentives for cooperative planning and technology sharing. Migration policies focused on skilled labor increase workforce mobility and regional human capital. Education and vocational training initiatives complement labor mobility programs. Joint research and innovation hubs facilitate knowledge exchange in strategic sectors. Multilateral agreements provide frameworks for dispute resolution and coordination. Confidence-building in diplomacy reduces incentives for confrontation.

Regional governance structures embed long-term cooperation and accountability. Economic corridors and trade integration projects promote sustainable growth. Labor and skills alignment addresses structural mismatches in the workforce. Maritime, energy, and environmental collaboration mitigates shared risks and vulnerabilities. Political and institutional reforms in Gulf states support long-term stability. External partnerships enhance capacity-building and diversify investment flows. Gulf states pursue strategic autonomy while engaging in selective partnerships.

Regional strategies integrate economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions. Energy interdependence and trade integration underpin Gulf cooperation frameworks. The Persian Gulf serves as both an arena of competition and a platform for constructive engagement. Informal dialogue, formal agreements, and institutional outcomes form a multi-layered framework for collaboration. Shared challenges, including climate, energy, and infrastructure, incentivize joint solutions. Gulf states increasingly recognize the value of multilateral coordination for regional stability. Strategic connectivity enhances both national and regional resilience.

Cooperation in ports, logistics, and energy networks embeds interdependence in practice. Economic diversification initiatives link domestic growth to regional integration. Labor and knowledge mobility facilitate human capital development across borders. Environmental and water cooperation provides a depoliticized avenue for trust-building. Regional institutions anchor long-term commitments and monitor policy implementation. Confidence-building in low-politics sectors creates pathways for collaboration in sensitive areas. Practical cooperation in technical domains builds credibility for broader strategic initiatives. Institutionalized dialogues and councils stabilize expectations among riparian states.

Regional strategies blend pragmatism, competition, and cooperation to maintain balance. Sectoral and multilateral linkages provide resilience against external shocks. Policy frameworks reflect a balance between national interests and regional integration. Strategic sequencing and trust-building enhance the likelihood of sustained cooperation. Gulf states leverage infrastructure, energy, and trade to reinforce regional interdependence. Shared economic and environmental challenges incentivize long-term collaboration. Multi-level governance links informal dialogue, formal agreements, and institutional mechanisms to manage complex interdependencies. Strategic engagement in the Gulf balances competition, collaboration, and stability objectives. The Persian Gulf remains central to national strategies, shaping economic, security, and diplomatic priorities for all riparian states.

18. GCC's Vision for the Persian Gulf

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Vision for Regional Security marks a watershed moment in the evolution of Gulf regional strategy. For decades, GCC security declarations were limited to joint defense pacts, summit communiqués, and ad hoc responses to crises. The 2024 Vision, formally adopted at the ministerial level and publicly presented by GCC Secretary General Jasem Mohamed Albudaiwi, represents a comprehensive strategic doctrine rather than a statement of intentions. Albudaiwi described it as "our common security" being the core foundation of shared prosperity and stability in the Gulf — a rhetorical framing that deliberately shifts the locus of security from external, external power dependence toward collective regional agency.

It is motivated by leveraging geography and to be more than the sum of its parts on their international scene:

The GCC states' religious and cultural role, their geopolitical and economic pivotal significance, central location in the middle of the most important sea lanes, and their pioneering role in resolving political and economic crises both regionally and globally.

Departure point

The security of GCC states is indivisible, which has become more urgent in light of the current regional and global instability. Their security is based on their shared destiny as enshrined in the GCC Charter, and in the Joint Defense Treaty, which stipulates that any attack against one GCC member states is an attack on all member states, and a threat against one of them is a threat against all. The GCC states are actively reinforcing their capabilities to deter dangers and sources of threat against their security and territorial integrity. They stand together against any aggression against any member state as aggression against all. They also play a pivotal role in supporting the security of neighboring countries and their political and economic stability, as well as fulfilling their role in ensuring international peace and security.

Objectives

Preserving regional security, stability of the countries of the region, prosperity of their people, and enhancing international peace and security, through:

- Tackling challenges facing the region, transforming them into opportunities for development and prosperity, building the future through settling disagreements by peaceful means, finding consensus-based solutions that ensure respect for the legitimate interests of all parties while avoiding polarization attempts.

- Building strategic relationships and regional and international partnerships to deal with sources of threat and tension in the region and world-wide, including through GCC states' role in ensuring security of energy supplies and stability of oil markets, enhancing maritime security and freedom of navigation, and their concern for the non-proliferation regime.

- Collectively addressing climate challenges to achieve environmental security and the Sustainable Development Goals

- Exploring ways to prevent future risks before they occur.

- Securing and defending their vital economic resources, creating investment opportunities to enhance their capabilities toward development and progress for their people, and undertaking ambitious and innovative projects through diverse strategic partnerships for cooperation and integration in all fields, with the objective of contributing to sustainable peace, security and prosperity, regionally and internationally.

It also states the means

Intensify efforts to continue playing an effective leadership role to spare the region the repercussions of wars, tackle regional crises, provide good offices, and support mediation efforts; call for the implementation of relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions; safeguard the sovereignty, unity, and security of states in the region; and counter external interference, which leads to tearing apart national unity and state institutions, and to obstructing necessary reforms.

At its core, the Vision affirms that security in the Gulf is indivisible: threats to one member state cannot be isolated from the region as a whole. This conceptual baseline aligns with longstanding GCC principles in the Joint Defense Agreement and the GCC Charter, which view mutual defense as integral to the survival and stability of member states. But the Vision goes further by explicitly coupling traditional defense considerations with non traditional threats — a recognition that contemporary security must be broadened to include economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

One of the central shifts embodied in the Vision is its emphasis on diplomacy and peaceful conflict resolution as primary mechanisms for managing regional disputes. Whereas earlier Gulf security frameworks emphasized deterrence and alliance reinforcement, the 2024 Vision underscores the institutionalization of dialogue mechanisms, confidence building measures, and negotiation channels as strategies to reduce the risk of conflict escalation. This reflects lessons learned from the 2017–2021 GCC diplomatic blockade of Qatar, intra Gulf tensions, and periodic Saudi Iran tensions, all of which revealed the limitations of hard security approaches.

The Vision articulates three main categories of security priorities:

First, it underscores collective defense and threat deterrence, reaffirming commitments to joint military readiness, intelligence sharing, and coordinated defense planning. It reaffirms that any external aggression — whether conventional military threats or hybrid warfare tactics like cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns — is to be countered through GCC unity and preparedness. This dimension echoes earlier defense commitments but situates them within a more structured institutional policy.

Second, the Vision introduces economic and structural resilience as pillars of security. It identifies energy supply security, economic diversification, supply chain continuity, and trade connectivity as strategic assets that require protection. Given that Gulf economies are world leading energy exporters — collectively representing a disproportionate share of global hydrocarbon exports — ensuring energy market stability and the security of export infrastructure is framed as essential to regional and global economic stability.

Third, the Vision places significant emphasis on non traditional security challenges, including climate change, water scarcity, food security, and environmental sustainability. This marks one of the most important conceptual expansions in GCC security policy: the understanding that ecological stressors and resource vulnerabilities can catalyze instability, migration pressures, and infrastructure stress, thereby affecting political and economic security. By integrating these issues into a regional security doctrine, the GCC formally recognizes that climate and environmental risks are as strategic as military threats.

The Vision also explicitly recognizes the importance of maritime security and freedom of navigation, especially in key chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, which sees an estimated one fifth of global oil trade pass through it annually. Protecting maritime routes from piracy, sabotage, or conflict disruption is presented as a shared responsibility requiring coordinated naval patrols, information sharing, and crisis response planning — both within the GCC and in cooperation with international partners when appropriate.

On the issue of counter terrorism and counter extremism, the Vision commits member states to deepen cooperation on intelligence, legal frameworks, border security, and financial controls aimed at disrupting extremist networks and preventing the financing of terror operations. It situates these efforts within broader international non proliferation and anti terror governance frameworks, signaling a willingness to align GCC counter terror measures with global standards rather than pursue isolated approaches.

Importantly, the Vision reaffirms support for regional peace initiatives, including the Arab Peace Initiative, as a framework for addressing long standing conflicts such as the Palestinian Israeli dispute through coordinated diplomacy. By doing so, it positions the GCC not only as a guarantor of intra Gulf stability but as a contributor to broader Arab and regional peace processes.

From an institutional perspective, the Vision outlines mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and periodic review. It calls for the activation of working groups, joint councils, and coordination cells tasked with translating high level policy goals into operational programs — from joint military exercises to shared energy grids and climate adaptation initiatives. This represents an effort to institutionalize cooperation rather than rely on episodic summit declarations.

One of the most striking aspects of the Vision is its integration of economic and environmental dimensions into security planning. Rather than treating economic diversification and resource management as separate from security, the document frames them as essential to the sustainability of the Gulf's strategic environment. This is particularly relevant in the context of global energy transitions, water scarcity challenges in arid environments, and interconnected supply chains — all areas where coordinated policy responses are critical.

Regional reactions to the Vision have generally emphasized its constructive scope and aspirational goals, though analysts note that implementation will require not just political will but institutional capacity building. Some commentators have argued that the Vision's success will hinge on developing robust mechanisms for trust building, dispute management, and

transparency measures — areas that historically have been constrained by strategic mistrust and competing geopolitical alignments among Gulf states.

The Vision's emphasis on external engagement and partnerships — without compromising regional sovereignty — also signals a pragmatic approach to Gulf security. It does not reject cooperation with external powers but situates such engagement within the context of regional ownership and agency. Cooperation with actors such as the European Union, the United States, and Asian powers is envisioned as part of broader frameworks that reinforce the Gulf's interests rather than defer to external agendas.

A critical interpretive lesson from the Vision is its effort to normalize regional cooperation with Iran, especially through peaceful dispute resolution and mechanisms that reduce the risk of miscalculation. While the Vision does not constitute a security alliance with Tehran, it does open conceptual space for managing common threats (such as maritime insecurity or climate risks) through dialogue and confidence building measures, moving beyond strictly adversarial constructs.

In practical terms, the Vision provides a roadmap for future cooperation across sectors: coordinated defense planning, integrated energy grids, shared climate adaptation strategies, joint infrastructure investments, harmonized legal regimes for trade and mobility, and institutional frameworks for periodic evaluation. It conceptualizes security not as a zero sum contest but as a positive sum undertaking that underwrites prosperity, stability, and sustainable development across the Gulf.

In summary, the GCC Vision for Regional Security represents a strategic evolution from narrow defense postures toward a multidimensional, integrated, cooperative security doctrine. It binds military deterrence, economic resilience, environmental sustainability, maritime security, counter terrorism, and diplomatic engagement into a unified framework that reflects the complex interdependencies of the 21st century Gulf. Its success will depend on implementation mechanisms, institutional capacity, and the willingness of member states to balance national interests with collective objectives, but it marks an important step toward a shared security architecture that encompasses more than just the absence of war — including economic stability, resource resilience, and diplomatic collaboration at multiple levels.

19. Contemporary Challenges in the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf remains a region of intense strategic importance, yet it faces a multiplicity of contemporary challenges that threaten regional stability, economic sustainability, and environmental resilience. These challenges are interconnected, reflecting the complex interplay of historical legacies, state ambitions, global energy markets, and demographic pressures.

Geopolitical Tensions and Security Challenges

The Persian Gulf is characterized by persistent geopolitical rivalry, particularly between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as principal actors. Sectarian divisions, especially the Sunni-Shia divide, exacerbate political tensions, influencing domestic governance and foreign policy alignments. Iran's nuclear program, missile development, and regional influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and

Lebanon have heightened the security anxieties of its neighbors, prompting military modernization and strategic partnerships with extraregional powers, notably the United States.

Maritime security remains a central concern, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint through which nearly one-third of global seaborne oil passes. Threats include military confrontations, asymmetric attacks on shipping vessels, and piracy. Past incidents, such as the seizure of tankers and the targeted attacks on oil infrastructure, underscore the vulnerability of global energy supply chains and the potential for rapid escalation into broader conflict. The presence of multiple foreign naval forces, including US, UK, and increasingly Chinese and Indian navies, further complicates security dynamics and risks miscalculation.

Regional conflicts, particularly in Yemen and Iraq, also reverberate across the Gulf. The ongoing war in Yemen, fueled by Saudi-Iranian rivalry, has created a protracted humanitarian crisis, while Iraq remains a theater of competing influences, including Iran-backed militias, US counterterrorism operations, and local governance challenges. These conflicts contribute to instability in border areas, disrupt trade routes, and impose humanitarian and economic burdens on Gulf states.

Geopolitical fragmentation continues to shape the dynamics of the Persian Gulf, as rivalries among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar generate persistent structural tensions. While the GCC has achieved remarkable economic and security coordination in certain periods, cohesion has occasionally faltered when political disputes or divergent foreign policy priorities emerge. In this context, informal dialogues acquire heightened significance. They provide a discreet space for states to explore compromises, clarify intentions, and test potential agreements without the immediate exposure and political cost of public commitments. Such exchanges allow leaders and technical experts alike to navigate sensitive issues, building trust incrementally and fostering channels that might later underpin formal cooperation.

The solution to these are important for an informal foreign policy dialogue to take off in the Persian Gulf among the littoral states in the context of a broken inter-arab order and enduring rivalry between KSA and Iran, tracing back to the age of the Caliphate and the Ssasinids.

Security Challenges in the Persian Gulf

Saudi Arabia:

Saudi Arabia views Iran's regional influence and military capabilities as a primary long-term security concern. Tehran's support for proxy actors, such as the Houthis in Yemen, along with its missile and UAV programs, is perceived as a direct threat to Saudi territory, critical infrastructure, and civilian populations. These unconventional threats drive Riyadh's strategic emphasis on maintaining robust defense and counter-terrorism capabilities, often in close cooperation with allies like the United States.

Beyond external threats, Saudi Arabia is attentive to internal sociopolitical shifts and the potential for regional conflicts to spill over into its borders. Smaller-scale conflicts, such as ongoing tensions in Yemen, highlight the Kingdom's need to manage asymmetric security threats while preserving internal stability and public confidence.

While Saudi Arabia has traditionally aligned with the U.S. in addressing Iranian influence, it has also pursued back-channel engagement with Tehran when feasible to reduce tensions and avoid escalation. This dual approach reflects Riyadh's broader strategy of balancing defensive readiness with diplomatic flexibility to maintain regional stability.

Saudi Arabia's strategic interests include protecting maritime routes and energy infrastructure, particularly given its reliance on Gulf shipping lanes for oil exports. Disruptions from military confrontations, proxy activities, or attacks on critical infrastructure are viewed as significant national security risks.

Overall, Saudi Arabia approaches Gulf security through a combination of military preparedness, alliance-building, counter-terrorism efforts, and selective diplomacy. This multifaceted approach is designed to mitigate asymmetric threats, preserve economic and political stability, and manage complex regional dynamics, particularly in relation to Iran.

IRAQ

Iraq occupies a unique position in Persian Gulf security dynamics. While it is not a GCC member, its location at the intersection of the Gulf, Iran, and Syria gives it strategic significance. Iraq's security perspective is shaped by internal instability, regional rivalries, and the legacy of past conflicts.

Iraq faces ongoing threats from insurgent groups, remnants of ISIS, and sectarian tensions. These domestic challenges make Iraq particularly sensitive to external interference. Security threats originating from the Persian Gulf region—such as arms smuggling, proxy activity, or regional military escalations—can exacerbate internal instability. Protecting Iraqi infrastructure, including oil facilities and border crossings, is a top priority, given that disruptions could have both economic and political consequences.

Iraq views the Gulf region through the lens of balancing relationships with Iran, GCC states, and the U.S.. Tehran's influence in Iraq is significant through political and paramilitary networks, which can be perceived both as a stabilizing force by some actors and as a source of tension by others. Meanwhile, U.S. military presence and GCC engagement in regional security operations are seen as potentially destabilizing if not coordinated with Baghdad. Iraq thus seeks to maintain strategic autonomy, often acting as a mediator or buffer in regional disputes.

While Iraq's coastline is limited to a narrow stretch along the Gulf, the country relies on Gulf shipping routes for its oil exports. Consequently, Iraq is concerned with maritime security, the protection of shipping lanes, and avoidance of disruptions from regional conflicts. Gulf incidents, such as tanker seizures, navigation system interference, or military confrontations, are perceived as indirect threats to Iraq's economic lifelines.

Iraq is increasingly aware of the emerging convergence of cyber and physical threats in the Gulf. Cyberattacks targeting regional infrastructure or financial systems could indirectly affect Iraq, given its economic and trade interdependencies. Hybrid threats—such as the use of proxy groups for political or military influence—also factor into Iraq's security calculus.

Iraq's overall approach to Gulf security is shaped by a preference for diplomacy and de-escalation, aiming to avoid entanglement in GCC-Iran confrontations while maintaining relations with both sides. Baghdad emphasizes regional dialogue, conflict mediation, and balanced engagement as key tools for preserving stability and national sovereignty.

Iran

From Tehran's point of view, key security challenges are primarily driven by external military threats, economic sanctions, and efforts at regional containment. Iran perceives the presence of U.S. and allied forces in the Gulf, as well as GCC defense partnerships, as direct threats to its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and strategic autonomy. These perceived pressures shape Tehran's approach to defense and regional influence.

Iran routinely conducts large-scale naval, missile, and UAV exercises to project readiness, deter potential aggression, and signal strategic capabilities to both regional and global actors. Missile and UAV programs are considered essential tools for deterrence, enabling Iran to counter superior conventional forces and maintain influence across the Gulf and neighboring regions. Tehran frames these capabilities as defensive rather than offensive, emphasizing resistance to external coercion and protection of national and regional sovereignty.

Domestically, Iran is concerned with political stability, social cohesion, and the economic pressures resulting from sanctions. These factors are viewed as integral to the country's broader security environment, influencing its ability to project influence abroad and maintain control internally. Economic constraints and domestic unrest are therefore treated as security challenges alongside external threats.

Iran's posture in the Gulf is also shaped by a perception of strategic encirclement and the need to balance confrontation with engagement. Tehran emphasizes maintaining influence with regional partners and pursuing strategic relationships beyond the Gulf, including alliances with powers such as Russia and China, as a hedge against external pressure and a way to bolster its security and geopolitical leverage.

Overall, Iran approaches Gulf security through a combination of deterrence, asymmetric capabilities, domestic stability measures, and selective regional partnerships. While Tehran asserts that it does not seek aggressive confrontation, its security calculus is heavily influenced by historical rivalries, past conflicts, and the perception of external containment efforts. This approach aims to safeguard sovereignty, sustain regional influence, and maintain internal resilience amid complex geopolitical pressures.

THE UAE

The UAE views its security environment through a lens that balances economic resilience, energy security, and military deterrence. Abu Dhabi's approach emphasizes protecting critical infrastructure, trade routes, and financial systems, while maintaining the flexibility to engage diplomatically with regional actors, including Iran.

The UAE is particularly concerned with maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz, given its vital role in global oil exports, and with cyber threats targeting critical sectors such as energy,

finance, and government services. Abu Dhabi invests in advanced defense capabilities and coordinates with allied partners to ensure rapid response to asymmetric or conventional threats, thereby sustaining deterrence in a volatile regional environment.

While the UAE maintains strong partnerships with Western powers, including the United States, it also pursues selective engagement with Iran to reduce regional tensions and hedge against escalation. This dual approach allows the UAE to balance deterrence with diplomacy, protecting its national interests while contributing to regional stability.

Economic stability is a key component of the UAE's security calculus. Disruptions to maritime trade, energy infrastructure, or digital systems could have immediate economic and political implications. Protecting these assets is therefore integral to Abu Dhabi's broader strategy, linking internal resilience to external security measures.

Overall, the UAE approaches Gulf security through a combination of military readiness, cyber resilience, diplomatic engagement, and economic protection. By balancing defensive preparedness with strategic diplomacy, the UAE aims to safeguard national interests, maintain stable trade flows, and mitigate the risks posed by regional tensions, including potential conflict with Iran.

Qatar:

Qatar's security priorities are shaped by its small size, strategic geography, and desire to maintain national autonomy. Doha places a strong emphasis on dialogue, mediation, and conflict de-escalation, particularly with regional actors like Iran, to avoid being drawn into proxy conflicts or broader regional confrontations.

Figure Qatari Students

Given its limited military footprint relative to neighboring powers, Qatar focuses on avoiding direct confrontation and mitigating risks through strategic diplomacy. Its security concerns include potential spillover from regional conflicts and the influence of external powers

operating in the Gulf. Doha invests selectively in defense capabilities to ensure sovereignty and protect key infrastructure, while relying on alliances for broader deterrence.

Qatar maintains autonomous diplomatic channels with multiple stakeholders, including Iran, the United States, and GCC partners. This approach ensures that it is not overly dependent on a single ally and allows it to act as a mediator in regional disputes, such as nuclear dialogue, crisis resolution, and inter-GCC tensions. Qatar's engagement-oriented stance reflects a long-term strategy of balancing relationships to safeguard national security while promoting regional stability.

Qatar's security strategy also prioritizes the protection of its economic interests, including energy infrastructure and trade routes, which are essential for sustaining its small but wealthy economy. Ensuring stability at home and maintaining secure channels for commerce are seen as critical components of national security.

Overall, Qatar approaches Gulf security through a combination of mediation, strategic diplomacy, selective military preparedness, and economic safeguarding. By emphasizing dialogue and engagement over confrontation, Qatar aims to maintain sovereignty, prevent entanglement in regional conflicts, and position itself as a neutral and stabilizing actor in Persian Gulf security dynamics.

Kuwait:

Kuwait typically espouses a neutral and diplomatic approach to security tensions, including those involving Iran. Its leadership repeatedly emphasizes de escalation and consensus within the GCC while avoiding overt confrontation. As a smaller state, Kuwait's security calculations prioritize protection of its economic assets and maintaining regional stability through dialogue rather than conflict.

Bahrain:

Bahrain's security concerns are deeply influenced by internal sectarian tensions and Iran's perceived role in supporting opposition movements. Manama often frames its security narrative around containing external influences that might exploit internal divisions. Like other GCC members, it also relies on collective defense arrangements and allied military guarantees, which shape its threat assessment and defense priorities.

Oman:

Oman's security outlook is anchored in balancing relations between larger regional powers. Muscat has historically played a mediation role between Tehran and other Gulf states or external partners like the U.S. Its security priorities include avoiding escalation and preserving navigational freedoms in the Strait of Hormuz while maintaining cordial ties with Iran to prevent direct confrontation.

Table – Security Incidents in the Persian Gulf

Year	Type	Incident / Description	Notes / Impact
2010–2012	Cyber	*Stuxnet* and related malware targeting Iranian nuclear facilities	Early state-linked cyberattacks; industrial disruption
2015	Military / Maritime	Rising tensions over Strait of Hormuz navigation	Minor naval standoffs reported; strategic chokepoint
2020	Military	*Konarak* vessel friendly-fire missile incident (Iran)	19 fatalities; highlights operational risks in Gulf waters
2021	Cyber	Iranian fuel distribution systems cyberattack	Disrupted payment and infrastructure systems
2023	Military / Maritime	Tanker seizures & naval confrontations	Heightened tension between Iran, US, and GCC nations
2024	Cyber	Sharp increase in GCC-targeted cyberattacks	UAE most targeted (33%), Saudi Arabia (29%), Kuwait (21%)
2025 (Q2)	Cyber	236% surge in DDoS attacks in MENA	Mainly finance, telecom, and government sectors affected
2025 (June)	Cyber / Maritime	GPS and AIS jamming affecting ~1,600 vessels	Navigation disruption in Persian Gulf; security & trade risk
2025 (April)	Industrial / Security	Port of Shahid Rajaee explosion (Iran)	Conflicting casualty reports; illustrates industrial security vulnerability
2025	Military	Missile attacks by Iran on US bases in Qatar & Iraq	Escalation of regional conflict; cross-border security implications

Observations & Implications

Rising cybersecurity threats have surged since 2020, with the Gulf region emerging as a hotspot for state-linked operations and hacker-driven attacks targeting government, energy, and financial sectors. For the GCC+1 dialogue, this trend necessitates stronger cyber intelligence-sharing between Gulf states and their partners to preempt attacks. It also underscores the importance of joint cybersecurity exercises and threat simulations to build operational resilience, as well as consideration of common cyber norms or deterrence frameworks to manage escalating risks. For EU–GCC cooperation, the rise in cyber threats presents an opportunity for the EU to provide capacity-building, advanced cyber defense technology, and legal frameworks. It also encourages standardized incident reporting to reduce information asymmetry in cross-regional threats.

Persistent maritime and military incidents remain frequent, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz, affecting regional stability and global trade flows. Within the GCC+1 dialogue, this situation emphasizes the need for joint maritime patrols, de-escalation protocols, and early warning systems. It can catalyze the creation of strategic crisis communication mechanisms to

avoid unintended escalation and encourages alignment of defense policies to safeguard vital oil and shipping routes. For EU–GCC relations, these tensions support EU interests in energy security and uninterrupted trade, fostering potential collaboration on maritime monitoring initiatives. This also opens avenues for EU–GCC cooperation on maritime cybersecurity to address hybrid threats that combine cyber and naval risks.

Emerging threats to critical infrastructure and navigation systems highlight the convergence of cyber and physical security risks. For the GCC+1 dialogue, this requires integrated risk assessments across sectors and the joint development of incident response protocols and redundancy systems to mitigate cascading failures. For EU–GCC cooperation, EU expertise in critical infrastructure protection, satellite navigation resilience, and industrial cybersecurity can support modernization efforts in the Gulf. Cross-regional coordination on threat intelligence for both physical and digital infrastructure is also strongly encouraged.

In summary, the Gulf region's evolving security landscape—marked by rising cyber threats, persistent maritime tensions, and vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure—calls for coordinated, multi-dimensional responses. For the GCC+1 dialogue, this means joint cyber and maritime initiatives and operational coordination. For EU–GCC relations, it opens avenues for technology cooperation, capacity building, and strategic partnership in securing critical assets.

Political Fragmentation and Governance Challenges

While Gulf states exhibit considerable wealth and stability relative to other regions, governance challenges persist. Authoritarian political structures, limited political participation, and centralized decision-making create resilience in some aspects but also constrain adaptability and accountability. Popular demands for social reform, youth engagement, and political inclusion, though often contained, indicate latent pressures that could influence domestic and regional politics.

In addition, intra-GCC divergences, such as the 2017–2021 Qatar diplomatic crisis, demonstrate the fragility of regional cooperation. Competing visions of foreign policy, divergent economic strategies, and ideological differences limit the effectiveness of collective decision-making on security, energy, and economic diversification.

Economic Vulnerabilities and Dependence on Hydrocarbons

Despite decades of wealth accumulation from oil and gas, Gulf economies face structural vulnerabilities. Most states remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports, making them susceptible to global price fluctuations. The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent global energy transition have further exposed the risks of overreliance on fossil fuels. Efforts at economic diversification, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's investment in technology and finance, and Qatar's emphasis on LNG and infrastructure, demonstrate an awareness of these vulnerabilities, but progress remains uneven.

Labor market dynamics also pose challenges. Large expatriate populations, often exceeding the native citizen workforce, are central to economic productivity but create social, political, and legal complexities. Issues related to labor rights, social integration, and the reliance on foreign talent expose Gulf economies to external shocks and domestic tensions. Additionally,

rising youth unemployment among citizens and the need for skills alignment in a post-oil economy present long-term policy challenges for human capital development.

Environmental and Climate Challenges

Environmental stressors represent a growing but often underappreciated challenge for the Gulf. The region's arid climate, extreme temperatures, and limited freshwater resources exacerbate the risks associated with population growth, urbanization, and industrialization. Overextraction of groundwater, reliance on desalination, and inefficient water management threaten long-term sustainability. Rising sea levels and coastal erosion, particularly in low-lying areas such as Bahrain and parts of Kuwait, pose significant risks to urban centers and critical infrastructure.

The Gulf is also among the regions most vulnerable to climate change. Increasing temperatures, prolonged droughts, and extreme weather events can disrupt energy production, food security, and labor productivity. Pollution from oil production, shipping, and urbanization further degrades environmental quality, affecting marine ecosystems and fisheries, which have historically supported local livelihoods. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated regional environmental policies and investment in sustainable technologies, including renewable energy and climate-resilient infrastructure.

Climate and water stress represent a third layer of complexity, as the Gulf faces some of the most extreme environmental conditions on the planet. Rising temperatures, acute water scarcity, and sea-level rise pose immediate threats to infrastructure, agriculture, and human health, yet environmental considerations have often been subordinated to defense and economic priorities. Informal exchanges offer a vital mechanism for knowledge-sharing, bringing together ministries, academic institutions, and civil society actors to discuss water management, renewable energy integration, and climate adaptation. These dialogues lay the groundwork for formal agreements, facilitating the transfer of best practices and the co-design of solutions that can be implemented across national boundaries.

Technological and Cybersecurity Threats

The Persian Gulf has also become a theater for technological competition and cybersecurity challenges. States are increasingly reliant on digital infrastructure for energy management, financial systems, and urban administration. Cyberattacks targeting oil infrastructure, financial networks, and government institutions highlight vulnerabilities to both state and non-state actors. The 2012–2019 period, for example, witnessed repeated cyber incursions attributed to regional and extraregional actors, reflecting the intersection of geopolitical rivalry and technological dependency.

Energy market volatility compounds these geopolitical pressures. Global shifts toward renewable energy, decarbonization agendas, and the unpredictability of oil prices place unprecedented strain on Gulf economies, which remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon revenues. GCC+1 dialogues increasingly focus on the coordination of OPEC+ commitments, stabilization of global energy flows, and long-term planning for post-oil economic diversification. As energy expert Jim Krane observes, decisions in this domain are as much a diplomatic enterprise as they are technical; informal consultations often precede formal agreements, providing the space for negotiation, scenario testing, and alignment of national

strategies. Such dialogues enable states to anticipate market shocks collectively and calibrate responses in a manner that formal institutions

Summary

The Persian Gulf remains one of the most geopolitically sensitive regions in the world. Regional rivalries, particularly between Iran and GCC states, create persistent tension. Proxy conflicts, such as in Yemen, exacerbate instability across borders. The Strait of Hormuz is a critical chokepoint for global energy supplies and remains vulnerable to disruption. Maritime security challenges threaten both commercial shipping and national economic interests. Missile and UAV programs in the region heighten the risk of rapid escalation. Cyber and hybrid threats increasingly target critical infrastructure and energy systems. The interdependence of Gulf economies means that disruptions can have widespread regional and global impact. GCC states often rely on Western alliances to bolster deterrence and defense readiness. Smaller Gulf states, like Qatar and Oman, prioritize diplomacy and mediation to reduce conflict risks.

Iran perceives external military presence and sanctions as central threats to its sovereignty. Tehran's investment in asymmetric capabilities is intended to deter aggression and maintain strategic leverage. Iraq, while not a GCC member, faces security spillover from regional conflicts and internal instability. Divergent threat perceptions among regional actors complicate efforts at coordination. Economic pressures, including fluctuating oil markets and sanctions, influence security priorities. Political instability within states can magnify vulnerability to external threats. The convergence of cyber, maritime, and conventional security risks creates complex, interconnected challenges. Balancing defense preparedness with diplomacy is a constant strategic consideration. Miscalculations or accidental escalations could quickly destabilize the region. Effective sub-regional integration requires trust, joint frameworks, and inclusive dialogue to manage these multifaceted security challenges.

Across the Persian Gulf, there is a shared emphasis on the protection of sovereignty and critical infrastructure. All states prioritize safeguarding territorial integrity, key economic assets, and essential systems. For the GCC, this often centers on energy facilities, maritime trade routes like the Strait of Hormuz, and cyber-physical networks, while Iran focuses on defending against perceived external military threats and economic coercion. Iraq, positioned at the intersection of these dynamics, stresses the importance of protecting its borders and maintaining internal stability.

Strategic partnerships and alliances form another core element of security policy in the region. GCC states rely heavily on Western partners, particularly the United States, as well as intra-GCC cooperation, to bolster deterrence and operational readiness. Iran seeks to counterbalance Western and Gulf influence through alliances with powers such as Russia and China, while Iraq carefully navigates relationships with Tehran, the GCC, and the U.S. to preserve autonomy and manage risk.

Deterrence and the development of asymmetric capabilities are universally central. Iran emphasizes its missile, UAV, and naval programs as tools of strategic deterrence, while GCC states invest in conventional military strength complemented by cyber defense, intelligence,

and missile interception systems. Iraq relies less on projection and more on alliances and border security as forms of indirect deterrence.

Sensitivity to regional tensions and the potential for escalation also defines security postures across the region. Smaller GCC states like Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman prioritize diplomacy and mediation to reduce the risk of conflict, whereas larger states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE combine strong deterrence with selective engagement. Iran interprets nearby military presence and regional alliances as direct security challenges, influencing a posture focused on readiness and strategic signaling.

Economic resilience and cybersecurity are increasingly integrated into security calculations. Gulf states view the protection of trade, energy exports, and financial systems as inseparable from national security, while Iran sees sanctions and economic pressures as central threats, and Iraq links economic stability to both internal cohesion and regional security. Cyber and hybrid threats are widely acknowledged as critical components of contemporary security risks, shaping both policy and operational planning.

Finally, there is a consistent pattern of balancing defense and diplomacy. GCC states maintain military preparedness while engaging selectively with Iran; Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman emphasize mediation and dialogue; Iran couples deterrence with partnerships and diplomatic engagement to reduce perceived encirclement; and Iraq navigates a careful middle path to maintain autonomy and mitigate risks.

In essence, despite differences in size, influence, and threat perception, all regional actors share a security posture that weaves together the protection of sovereignty, strategic alliances, deterrence, economic and cyber resilience, and calibrated diplomacy. The divergence lies primarily in how assertively each actor pursues these goals, shaped by geography, historical experience, and exposure to regional volatility.

20.Opportunities for Cooperation in the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf, historically a theater of both economic dynamism and geopolitical competition, presents a wide range of opportunities for regional cooperation. While the Gulf has been characterized by conflicts and rivalries, particularly along sectarian and political lines, it simultaneously holds significant potential as a zone of collaboration. The region's strategic location, vast hydrocarbon resources, growing economic diversification, and evolving social dynamics provide multiple avenues through which Gulf states can deepen cooperation across economic, security, environmental, and technological domains.

Historical Foundations of Regional Cooperation

Opportunities for cooperation in the Persian Gulf are rooted in a shared historical and cultural heritage. For millennia, the Gulf has served as a hub of commerce and maritime exchange, connecting Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, India, and East Africa. Ports such as Dilmun, Siraf, and Basra facilitated the flow of goods, ideas, and people across the region, forging networks of interdependence. These historical patterns of trade and cultural exchange provide a framework for understanding the feasibility of contemporary cooperative ventures,

suggesting that the Gulf's geography and shared experiences naturally favor interconnectedness.

Islamic civilization further strengthened regional networks, creating transnational religious, legal, and commercial ties that integrated the Gulf into broader Indian Ocean and Middle Eastern systems. The medieval trade of pearls, textiles, spices, and other commodities fostered economic interdependence, while shared cultural and religious institutions contributed to a sense of collective identity. These historical precedents underline the capacity of Gulf states to overcome political differences when economic or strategic incentives align.

Economic Cooperation and Integration

One of the most visible avenues for regional cooperation in the contemporary Persian Gulf is economic integration. Hydrocarbon wealth provides both a foundation and a motivation for collaborative economic strategies. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), established in 1981, exemplifies efforts to promote economic unity among Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Key initiatives include the creation of a customs union, proposals for a single currency, and the coordination of monetary and fiscal policies. While implementation has been uneven, these structures offer a platform for deeper economic collaboration, particularly in trade, investment, and energy management.

Joint investment in infrastructure projects represents another opportunity for cooperation. Transportation networks, including ports, railways, and airports, can enhance interconnectivity, reduce trade costs, and facilitate the movement of goods and people. The Gulf Railway project, envisioned to link GCC member states, exemplifies such potential, promising to integrate national economies and foster a shared sense of regional development. Similarly, coordinated investment in industrial zones, logistics hubs, and financial centers can create complementary economies that reduce dependence on oil revenues while generating employment and innovation.

Energy cooperation, particularly in the context of oil and natural gas, is both historically and contemporarily significant. The establishment of shared strategic reserves, joint management of hydrocarbon production, and coordinated investment in renewable energy projects offer tangible benefits. The Gulf states, possessing a high concentration of capital and technical expertise, can develop joint ventures in liquefied natural gas (LNG), petrochemicals, and alternative energy, enhancing regional resilience to global market fluctuations and facilitating collective economic diversification.

Security Cooperation and Stability

The Persian Gulf's geopolitical volatility makes security cooperation both a necessity and an opportunity. While regional rivalries persist, mechanisms for confidence-building and coordinated defense strategies can mitigate risks of conflict and promote collective security. Multilateral forums such as the GCC provide a basis for joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and the development of common threat assessments. Coordination in maritime security, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz and surrounding waterways, is critical for ensuring the safe passage of energy resources and commercial shipping. Collaborative anti-piracy

operations, counterterrorism initiatives, and naval patrols exemplify practical avenues for cooperative security engagement.

Furthermore, regional security cooperation can reduce dependence on external powers and promote indigenous capacity-building. Joint investment in defense infrastructure, standardized training programs, and interoperability initiatives among Gulf militaries can foster mutual trust and strategic alignment. While sectarian and ideological differences may constrain certain aspects of security collaboration, targeted cooperation in areas of mutual interest—such as combating illicit trafficking, cyber threats, and extremist networks—remains highly feasible.

Corporate security in the naval domain describes a form of security focused on protecting maritime economic circulation rather than state territory. It centers on safeguarding shipping lanes, ports, offshore energy installations, and undersea infrastructure. State navies play a key role, but they operate alongside private security providers, insurers, and corporate risk managers. The primary objective is to ensure the uninterrupted flow of trade, energy, and data across seas. Threats are defined less as enemy states and more as disruptions such as piracy, sabotage, or gray-zone interference. Legal authority and accountability are often diffuse, reflecting the mix of public and private actors involved. Security practices are risk-based and infrastructure-oriented rather than oriented toward decisive naval battles. In IR terms, the referent object of security is economic continuity within the global maritime system.

This is important so long as it is compatabile with a pilot project on the merger of the Artesh and the IRGC Naval Units not engaged in territorial defence to signal commitment and agility within budget and time part and parcel of a middle east strategy to achieve enduring peace and deesacalation in this subregion of the Middle East.

Environmental Cooperation

Environmental challenges present both a pressing threat and a significant opportunity for regional cooperation. The Persian Gulf faces shared environmental stressors, including water scarcity, rising temperatures, coastal erosion, and marine pollution. These challenges cannot be effectively addressed by individual states acting in isolation, necessitating a coordinated regional approach. Joint initiatives in water management, such as shared desalination technologies, aquifer monitoring, and conservation strategies, can enhance resilience against climate-related stressors.

Marine environmental protection is another area for cooperative engagement. The Gulf's rich biodiversity, including fisheries and coral reefs, is vulnerable to industrial pollution, oil spills, and habitat degradation. Coordinated environmental regulations, monitoring frameworks, and emergency response protocols can preserve these ecosystems while sustaining livelihoods dependent on fisheries and tourism. Moreover, collective investment in renewable energy and low-carbon technologies offers a dual benefit: addressing climate risks while creating new economic sectors and employment opportunities. Initiatives such as joint solar, wind, and nuclear energy projects can position the Gulf as a leader in sustainable development within the Middle East.

Technological and Innovation Collaboration

Technological development is a critical frontier for Gulf cooperation, particularly as states seek to diversify economies and reduce dependence on oil. The establishment of regional innovation hubs, collaborative research institutions, and joint investment in digital infrastructure can create synergies across member states. Smart city development, fintech, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing offer avenues for shared economic growth and global competitiveness.

Educational and research collaboration is a key mechanism to sustain technological advancement. Joint universities, research partnerships, and regional scholarship programs can cultivate human capital capable of driving innovation and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, coordinated policies for digital governance, cybersecurity, and data management can enhance regional resilience against emerging threats, fostering a secure and interconnected digital ecosystem.

Cultural and Social Cooperation

Beyond economics, security, and technology, the Persian Gulf offers opportunities for deeper cultural and social cooperation. Shared historical, linguistic, and religious traditions provide a foundation for educational exchanges, cultural programs, and tourism initiatives. Collaborative promotion of heritage sites, museums, and arts festivals can strengthen regional identity, promote soft power, and stimulate economic activity in the cultural sector. Social initiatives, including labor rights, health, and education programs, can be coordinated across states to address shared demographic challenges, particularly the integration of expatriate populations and the development of youth capabilities.

Energy Transition and Regional Leadership

As global energy markets shift toward decarbonization, the Persian Gulf has an opportunity to position itself as a leader in the energy transition. Joint initiatives in renewable energy, hydrogen production, and carbon capture can leverage the Gulf's financial capacity, technological expertise, and geographic advantages. By establishing regional energy research centers, standardizing environmental regulations, and promoting cross-border investment in clean technologies, Gulf states can collectively maintain relevance in global energy markets, secure economic diversification, and contribute to global climate mitigation goals.

Regional and Global Partnerships

Opportunities for cooperation extend to interactions with external powers and multilateral institutions. Strategic partnerships with Europe, Asia, and North America can facilitate technology transfer, investment, and diplomatic support for regional initiatives. Collaborative engagement with organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Renewable Energy Agency can amplify regional capacity in areas including climate adaptation, infrastructure development, and conflict resolution. Gulf states can also jointly participate in international trade frameworks, regional free trade zones, and investment corridors, enhancing their collective influence in global economic governance.

Challenges and Preconditions for Effective Cooperation

While opportunities abound, effective cooperation in the Persian Gulf requires overcoming structural obstacles. Political rivalries, sectarian divides, and historical grievances can constrain trust and impede collective action. Ensuring transparency, equitable distribution of benefits, and inclusive governance are essential preconditions. Similarly, economic disparities among Gulf states, differences in resource endowments, and varying levels of technological readiness must be addressed through carefully calibrated strategies that emphasize complementarity and mutual advantage.

Summary

The Persian Gulf possesses abundant opportunities for regional cooperation, spanning economic integration, security coordination, environmental management, technological development, and cultural exchange. Historical precedents of trade and shared cultural identity, coupled with contemporary imperatives such as economic diversification, climate resilience, and energy transition, create a strong incentive for collaboration. By leveraging shared interests, pooling resources, and fostering institutional frameworks for joint action, Gulf states can enhance regional stability, promote sustainable development, and secure a more prosperous and interconnected future. Cooperative strategies, when implemented effectively, have the potential to transform the Persian Gulf from a region historically characterized by competition into a model of regional collaboration and resilience in the 21st century.

To foster meaningful subregional integration, states should first prioritize mutual recognition of shared interests and vulnerabilities. Economic interdependence, maritime security, energy stability, and cyber resilience offer natural avenues for cooperation. Do invest in joint infrastructure projects, coordinated maritime patrols, and shared cybersecurity frameworks, as these create tangible incentives for collaboration while reinforcing trust. Dialogue mechanisms, whether formal GCC+1 frameworks or informal track-two channels, are essential to mediate disputes and de-escalate tensions before they escalate into crises. Do encourage transparent communication, shared intelligence, and standardized protocols for maritime, cyber, and industrial security incidents, which reduce uncertainty and enhance predictability across borders.

Equally important is fostering inclusive decision-making. Smaller states should have meaningful voice and representation in regional initiatives, ensuring that integration is seen as a cooperative venture rather than dominance by larger powers. Do cultivate joint exercises and collaborative planning that balance defensive preparedness with diplomatic engagement, signaling commitment to both security and regional stability.

Conversely, there are clear pitfalls to avoid. Don't allow historical grievances, zero-sum thinking, or proxy conflicts to dominate strategic calculations, as these undermine trust and fragment potential cooperation. Avoid over-reliance on external powers to enforce regional security, which can weaken indigenous mechanisms and exacerbate perceptions of encirclement or interference. Don't neglect economic and cyber dimensions of security; failing to coordinate in these domains can allow vulnerabilities to propagate across borders, creating systemic risks. Finally, don't let integration efforts become purely symbolic; initiatives must produce measurable outcomes in security, trade, and crisis management, or they risk losing credibility.

In sum, promoting subregional integration requires a careful balance of shared security frameworks, mutual trust, inclusive participation, and practical cooperation. The goal is not to erase differences but to manage them constructively, transforming the Gulf's historically fragmented security environment into a networked system that enhances resilience, reduces escalation risk, and reinforces both national and collective interests.

21. Future Opportunities

Strengthening functional cooperation emerges as a foundational priority for the Gulf, where informal GCC+1 dialogues serve as catalysts for tangible, cross-border collaboration. These exchanges facilitate joint infrastructure planning, including the integration of electricity grids, coordinated renewable energy projects, and shared desalination or water management systems. By focusing on practical, operational initiatives, states create immediate benefits that reinforce trust, demonstrating that cooperation can yield concrete results even in the absence of formal treaties. In this manner, functional collaboration lays the groundwork for deeper institutionalized agreements, turning dialogue into action.

The regional energy transition presents both a challenge and an opportunity to bridge competing national interests. Informal coordination on renewables, green hydrogen, and energy efficiency allows GCC+1 actors to align research agendas, investment priorities, and regulatory frameworks before committing to formal arrangements. By reducing uncertainty and fostering a shared understanding of emerging technologies and markets, these dialogues serve as a strategic instrument for harmonizing energy policy, while simultaneously building confidence among states with divergent economic or geopolitical priorities.

Institutionalizing track-two diplomacy strengthens the resilience of regional governance. Establishing regular, structured informal forums—encompassing think tanks, academic networks, and expert workshops—normalizes dialogue, mitigates crises, and creates early-warning mechanisms for geopolitical, economic, or environmental shocks. These channels provide safe spaces to build consensus on sensitive matters, including maritime security, defense posture, or energy coordination, allowing policymakers to anticipate challenges and negotiate solutions without the immediate pressures of public scrutiny or formal negotiation.

Youth and knowledge networks represent a critical vector for sustaining long-term cooperation and economic resilience. Informal dialogues can catalyze cross-border educational initiatives, academic exchanges, and innovation programs, cultivating human capital while fostering a regional culture of collaboration. By circulating skills, ideas, and research across borders, these networks prepare the Gulf for a post-oil economy, mitigate risks associated with economic monocultures, and strengthen the adaptive capacity of institutions and communities alike.

Finally, environmental and climate security have emerged as domains where informal dialogue is both urgent and transformative. By sharing best practices, technical data, and scenario modeling, GCC+1 actors can develop coordinated strategies for climate adaptation, linking national security, urban planning, and energy strategy. These collaborative efforts not only reduce vulnerability to environmental shocks but also embed a culture of foresight and joint problem-solving, demonstrating that dialogue can produce both tangible outcomes and enduring institutional learning in the face of complex, shared challenges.

22.The Informal Foreign Policy Dialogue

Informal GCC+1 foreign policy dialogues represent far more than auxiliary diplomatic channels; they constitute a strategic instrument for shaping the Persian Gulf's evolving regional order. In a context defined by shifting alliances, complex interdependencies, and unprecedented economic and environmental pressures, these dialogues allow states to navigate sensitive issues with both agility and discretion. By enabling sustained communication outside the glare of public scrutiny, they create space for experimentation, compromise, and consensus-building in ways that formal diplomacy alone cannot achieve.

Through these mechanisms, Gulf states are able to anticipate and mitigate potential crises before they escalate into open confrontation, particularly in domains where traditional rivalry might otherwise block cooperation. Energy markets, for instance, have long served as both a source of wealth and tension in the region. Informal consultations facilitate early alignment on production strategies, investment in renewables, and coordination of market signals, allowing states to stabilize economic flows while preparing for a post-oil future. Similarly, transboundary environmental challenges—ranging from water scarcity and marine ecosystem degradation to climate-induced urban risks—can be addressed with greater efficacy when technical experts, civil society actors, and policymakers engage through these semi-structured channels.

Equally important is the role of human capital and youth engagement. Informal dialogues create opportunities to share best practices in education, vocational training, and workforce development, cultivating a generation capable of driving economic diversification, technological innovation, and cross-border collaboration. By integrating environmental, energy, and social policy discussions into these exchanges, states foster a multi-dimensional approach that links economic resilience with societal stability.

Ultimately, the GCC+1 informal dialogue process is not merely reactive; it is transformative. It embeds patterns of trust, transparency, and coordination into the region's political culture, gradually reshaping perceptions of security, risk, and interdependence. Rather than relying solely on deterrence or formal treaties, the Gulf increasingly demonstrates that durable stability emerges from repeated, low-risk interactions that build shared understanding and mutual confidence. These dialogues, grounded in both pragmatism and foresight, offer a pathway for the Persian Gulf to evolve from a region historically defined by competition and external intervention into a more cohesive, resilient, and forward-looking space where economic innovation, environmental stewardship, and societal development reinforce one another.

23. The Informal GCC+1 Foreign Policy Dialogue

To transform informal GCC+1 dialogues into durable mechanisms of cooperation, policymakers should pursue concrete, actionable strategies that institutionalize trust, knowledge sharing, and joint problem-solving across economic, environmental, and social domains. First, establishing joint task forces on priority issues such as renewable energy, water management, and climate adaptation can enable technical experts from multiple states to collaboratively design, implement, and monitor cross-border projects. These task forces would

operate under shared mandates, define measurable objectives, and report periodically to senior policymakers, ensuring that outcomes are tangible and strategically aligned.

Second, creating regional forums for dialogue—both formal and informal—can expand the space for multi-sectoral collaboration. Forums could convene government officials, private sector leaders, academics, and civil society actors, providing platforms to explore innovative solutions, harmonize regulations, and coordinate investment strategies. Such gatherings could be sector-specific, for example focused on green hydrogen, desalination technologies, or digital infrastructure, allowing discussions to move beyond general rhetoric toward actionable plans.

Third, policymakers should encourage cross-border youth and academic programs to build human capital and foster shared expertise. Scholarships, joint research initiatives, and regional innovation hubs can link young professionals with practical experience in emerging industries, reinforcing workforce readiness while promoting regional cohesion. These programs also serve a soft power function, cultivating networks of informed, engaged actors capable of sustaining long-term cooperative dynamics.

Fourth, enhancing data-sharing agreements and early warning systems across borders is crucial. Joint monitoring of energy markets, water resources, and environmental indicators enables states to anticipate risks, coordinate responses, and reduce the likelihood of unilateral or conflicting action. Such mechanisms also strengthen trust, as transparency and shared evidence create a factual foundation for negotiation.

The long-term implications of these strategies are substantial. By institutionalizing cooperation around functional domains rather than political rivalries alone, Gulf states can reduce strategic uncertainty, lower the costs of conflict, and build resilience against global economic shocks. Coordinated energy and environmental policies accelerate economic diversification, ensuring that post-oil economies are supported by skilled labor, sustainable infrastructure, and resilient markets. Human capital investments, particularly in youth, generate a workforce capable of innovation, entrepreneurship, and cross-border collaboration, transforming potential demographic pressures into engines of growth.

In sum, operationalizing GCC+1 dialogues through joint task forces, regional forums, youth programs, and data-sharing initiatives offers a forward-looking framework for regional stability. These measures not only mitigate immediate risks but also create enduring structures for collective problem-solving, ensuring that the Persian Gulf evolves into a more integrated, resilient, and economically diversified region capable of navigating both the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Table

Dimension	UAE	KSA	Iran	Iraq	Oman	Bahrain
Diplomacy	*Best practice:* Active multilateral engageme	*Best practice:* Vision 2030 diplomacy aligned with economic reform; expanding GCC	*Best practice:* Independent regional policy and resistance	*Best practice:* Post-ISIS reconstruction diplomacy;	*Best practice:* Quiet mediation, balance between	*Best practice:* Dialogue emphasis in GCC; opened channels with neighbors.

nt (UN, COP, peace missions, humanitarian diplomacy). Strategic pivot to balancing US, China, Russia ties. *Outcomes:* Reputation as mediator (e.g., in Sudan, Yemen de-escalation channels).	ties and normalizing relations (incl. with regional neighbors). *Outcomes:* Improved Arab-regional acceptance; leadership in OPEC+.	diplomacy; use of soft power in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon. *Outcomes:* Strategic depth but high tension with GCC and West; sanctions constraints.	balancing US/Iran influence; engaging multilaterally (Arab League). *Outcomes:* Fragile state diplomacy; limited outreach capacity.	GCC and Iran; respect for neutrality. *Outcomes:* Stability-focused diplomacy; respected as niche mediator.	*Outcomes:* Limited reach outside Gulf; leverages Gulf Council networks.
Economics — Rapid diversification via sovereign funds, tech, tourism, logistics; business ease reforms. *Outcomes:* Growth beyond hydrocarbons; FDI hub.	Vision 2030 reforms; NEOM & giga projects; private sector promotion; anti-corruption restructuring. *Outcomes:* Rising non-oil share but still hydrocarbon-dependent.	Mixed reforms; state-led industry focus; sanctions-induced self-reliance. *Outcomes:* Inflation, limited FDI; resource rent still dominant.	Oil-reliant with weak diversification; informal economy risks. *Outcomes:* Low growth volatility; reconstruction resource gaps.	Oil small economy, small manufacturing; tourism & logistics diversification. *Outcomes:* Slow but steady diversification; fiscal buffers.	Financial hub orientation; small manufacturing, services, fintech. *Outcomes:* Steady services growth; talent attraction but vulnerable to regional shocks.
Environmental Governance — Climate policy leadership (UAE Net Zero by 2050, Masdar, solar & clean energy). *Outcomes:* Scaling renewables; hosting	Renewable scale-up (NEOM green grid), solar, hydrogen piloting; emissions targets. *Outcomes:* Growing clean energy footprint.	Limited climate governance due to sanctions & economic priority; emerging environmental signals. *Outcomes:* Pollution & water stress unresolved.	Acute environmental risks (dust storms, water scarcity, oil pollution); weak regulation enforcement. *Outcomes:*	Water conservation policy; renewable pilot projects; adaptation planning. *Outcomes:* Incremental environmental standards; climate	Small-scale renewable policy, environmental regulation frameworks under development. *Outcomes:* Early stage institutionalization.

	COP28 in 2023.			High environmental vulnerability.	adaptation as priority.	
Social Development	Human capital investment; high quality education & health systems; migrant inclusion policies evolving. *Outcomes:* High HDI, talent hub.	Reforms to education and workforce nationalization (Saudization); health system investment; women's participation expanding. *Outcomes:* Social transformation underway.	Gender gaps remain large; education strong but economic absorption weak. *Outcomes:* Brain drain pressures; social services uneven.	Post-conflict rebuilding of social services; youth unemployment persistent. *Outcomes:* Vulnerable social indicators.	Strong social services; balanced welfare & labour policy; gradual reforms. *Outcomes:* High social stability.	Progressive education systems; health access high; small population facilitates services delivery. *Outcomes:* Strong basic social outcomes.

Best Practice Highlights by Domain

Diplomacy and Regional Governance

UAE and Oman demonstrate strategic neutrality, diversified external partnerships, and humanitarian diplomacy, offering models for adaptive multilateralism beyond zero-sum regionalism. KSA illustrates how tying diplomacy to a comprehensive domestic strategy, such as Vision 2030, amplifies economic transformation through foreign policy coherence. Iraq's emerging diplomacy highlights the importance of post-conflict relationship building and regional balancing.

Economic Strategy and Diversification

The UAE's sovereign wealth fund-led ecosystem, including ADQ and Mubadala, with sectoral clusters in technology, logistics, and tourism, sets a model for state-enabled diversification. KSA's bold flagship projects, including giga-cities, privatization initiatives, and labor market reform, show how strategic industrial policy drives structural change. Bahrain's specialization in banking and services demonstrates how a niche economic identity can be coherent and effective for smaller economies.

Environmental Governance

UAE and KSA lead renewable energy deployment in the region, providing replicable frameworks for energy transition in hydrocarbon-dependent states. Oman emphasizes water conservation and adaptation planning, serving as a model for arid climate resilience policy integration. Across the Gulf, shared desert challenges highlight the value of regional standards for water security and clean energy cooperation.

Social Development and Inclusion

UAE and Bahrain achieve high human development outcomes, showing how investment in human capital combined with inclusive service delivery generates measurable well-being. KSA's rapid social transformation, including increased women's labor participation, demonstrates effective policy sequencing in socially conservative contexts. Oman balances welfare provision with fiscal sustainability, offering an alternative to universal subsidy models.

GCC-Level Added Value

The Gulf Cooperation Council provides institutional layers and public goods that individual states often cannot produce alone. Economic integration is facilitated through the GCC Customs Union, common trade policies, and intra-GCC mobility, which create economies of scale, while shared liquidity frameworks reduce financial fragmentation. Energy and environmental collaboration includes joint renewable energy projects, grid planning, and shared frameworks for water desalination and resource conservation. Security and diplomacy benefit from joint defense mechanisms, such as the GCC Joint Peninsula Shield Force, conflict de-escalation platforms, and a collective voice in global fora like OPEC+ coordination. Human development cooperation is strengthened through shared educational standards, health system protocols, and labor frameworks, with mutual recognition of qualifications enhancing workforce fluidity. Policy diffusion and benchmarking occur via GCC workshops and councils, which serve as regional learning platforms for strategies including renewable energy and economic reform. Limitations arise from divergent external alignments, such as Iran's non-GCC status, varying institutional capacities, and political frictions that reduce coherence. Opportunities include deepening cooperation on environmental governance networks, regional water and climate security, and collective economic innovation clusters, such as joint sovereign fund mechanisms for technology, healthcare, and climate initiatives.

Key Insights for Strategy and Policy Design

Aligning diplomacy with economic and social objectives creates resilient governance systems, as evidenced by UAE and KSA. Diversification requires careful sequencing, where institutional reform, private sector enablement, and human capital development proceed in coordinated phases. Environmental governance is a regional common pool resource, and shared climatic risks make integrated resource management more effective than fragmented national responses. Social policy innovation anchors stability, balancing social inclusion with economic opportunity to mitigate vulnerability amid structural transitions. Regional cooperation amplifies impact, with the GCC serving as a crucial vehicle for scaling national reforms into shared regional outcomes, particularly for small and medium Gulf states.

Recommendations for Further Comparative Research

Further analysis could integrate quantitative indicators such as HDI, non-oil GDP share, CO_2 per capita, and governance indices. Detailed case studies could examine UAE's renewable energy auctions, KSA's NEOM strategy, and Oman's water law reforms. Policy process mapping can illustrate how reforms are legislated and institutionalized. Stakeholder analysis would explore the interactions between the state, society, the private sector, and civil society engagement.

24. REGIONAL CONTEXT

Regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf has historically been shaped by security imperatives, economic interdependence, and external power dynamics. In recent years, however, the drivers of cooperation are evolving in response to broader shifts in regional alliances, economic diversification away from hydrocarbons, and the strategic imperatives of climate change, water scarcity, and technology transition. This broader context is reshaping the meaning and potential of Gulf cooperation, extending it beyond traditional security frameworks into multifaceted economic, environmental, and societal domains.

Geopolitical Context and Shifting Alliances

The past decade has seen notable realignments in the Gulf. Historic rifts among GCC members have, at times, constrained regional integration. However, diplomatic rapprochements—such as the 2021 Saudi–Qatar agreement that helped thaw long standing tensions—have created openings for renewed cooperation. Similarly, the normalization of relations between some Gulf states and external powers, and the deepening ties with Asian economies, reflect a strategic diversification of partnerships that reduces exclusive reliance on Western security architectures.

These shifts have implications for cooperation: as states recalibrate their foreign policies, there is greater willingness to institutionalize dialogue on issues that transcend narrow strategic competition. Rather than viewing cooperation solely through the lens of military balance or alliance structures, Gulf states are increasingly approaching regional integration in terms of economic connectivity, infrastructural interoperability, and shared environmental challenges.

Economic Diversification and Energy Market Transitions

Global energy markets are undergoing a transformation. Long term forecasts by major energy institutions point to sustained growth in renewables and declining long term demand for fossil fuels, particularly in advanced economies. This trend has prompted Gulf states to articulate economic visions that reduce dependence on hydrocarbon rents. Initiatives like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Energy Strategy 2050 reflect a strategic pivot toward investments in renewables, advanced industries, tourism, and digital technologies.

This economic reorientation creates a powerful incentive for regional cooperation. Shared infrastructure projects—such as interconnected grids for renewable power, collaborative investments in green hydrogen, or joint ventures in clean desalination—are gaining traction because they offer mutual benefits: risk sharing, scale economies, and improved market competitiveness. According to energy scholar David Roberts, "the energy transition is not just about technology; it is about institutional cooperation" that links producers with shared incentives to innovate and adapt. By coordinating on clean energy standards and cross border markets, Gulf states can deepen economic integration while preparing for post oil futures.

Environmental Imperatives as a Unifying Force

Water scarcity, climate change, and coastal vulnerabilities represent existential challenges for the Gulf. The region is one of the most water stressed in the world, and extreme heat is increasing both in intensity and frequency. These are not problems any state can solve in isolation; their transboundary nature creates a structural imperative for cooperation. Scholars

like Mehran Kamrava, an expert on Gulf politics, argue that "environmental challenges may be the strongest catalyst for regional cooperation in decades," precisely because they affect all Gulf littoral states irrespective of political divides.

Collaborative frameworks for environmental monitoring, joint research on climate adaptation, shared early warning systems for extreme weather, and harmonized policy responses to maritime pollution are emerging as pragmatic arenas for cooperation. These domains are arguably less politically sensitive than defense cooperation but more strategically consequential for societal resilience.

Economic Interdependence and Non State Actors

Economic interdependence in trade, investment, and labor markets also incentivizes cooperation. Gulf economies are deeply interconnected through supply chains, expatriate labor flows, and intra regional trade agreements. The private sector is an increasingly important actor; major firms in energy, logistics, and finance operate across borders and have a vested interest in regional stability. Institutional investors and sovereign wealth funds are also collaborating on ventures in technology, infrastructure, and sustainable industries.

Civil society and academic institutions contribute to these cooperative dynamics by generating research, facilitating dialogue, and convening stakeholders across borders. Regional scholars emphasize the importance of "epistemic communities"—networks of experts who build shared knowledge and policy frameworks—that can underpin more formal regional governance mechanisms.

Expert Perspectives on the Future of Gulf Cooperation

Regional experts identify several strategic domains where cooperation could be both politically viable and substantively impactful:

• Renewable energy integration and green markets: As Gulf states invest in solar, wind, and hydrogen, scholars like Jim Krane (Rice University) highlight the opportunity for "a new energy architecture that binds Gulf economies together through shared standards and cross border infrastructure."

• Water and food security: Environmental policy experts argue that joint investments in desalination technology, wastewater recycling, and sustainable agriculture can produce tangible benefits while building trust.

• Human capital and labor mobility: Cooperation in education, skills training, and workforce development can support economic diversification and facilitate the mobility of qualified workers across the region.

• Climate risk governance: As climate risks intensify, coordinated adaptation strategies—such as coastal defenses and climate financing mechanisms—offer shared value and reduce the strategic salience of unilateral action.

The trajectory of regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf shows both promise and complexity. Shifts in alliances and energy markets have opened space for collaboration that goes beyond traditional security frameworks. Environmental imperatives, economic diversification agendas, and shared demographic transitions (notably the centrality of youth engagement) create opportunities for pragmatic, sustained cooperation.

However, cooperation is not automatic. It requires institutional mechanisms that can bridge mistrust, align national strategies, and manage transboundary challenges. As scholar Mehran Kamrava notes, "Cooperation arises not only from shared interest but from the persistent cultivation of dialogue and trust." If Gulf states can institutionalize such dialogue—particularly in functional domains like water management, renewable energy, and climate adaptation—the region could build a more resilient, diversified, and cooperative future that reflects both global shifts and local imperatives.

25. ENVIRONMENTAL SECURTY ISSUES IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Around 8,000 years ago, rising sea levels from melting ice sheets flooded a dry river valley, forming the modern Persian Gulf. Before this event, the area—known as the Gulf Oasis—was a fertile, inhabitable basin fed by the Tigris, Euphrates, Karun, and Wadi Baton rivers. As surrounding areas became arid, this oasis offered a water-rich environment for humans, serving as a refuge for early modern human populations during environmental extremes. The sea eventually broke through the Strait of Hormuz, submerging the land and establishing the current coastline. This inundation by the Indian Ocean transformed the landscape from fertile plains to a shallow marine environment. The submerged region is sometimes called the "Persian Gulf Oasis" or "Middle Eastern Atlantis," as it may have hosted human settlements prior to the flooding.

Figure

Source: https://www.persiansarenotarabs.com/persian-gulf/

Ancient human settlements may have existed near areas corresponding to modern cities such as Basra (Iraq), Ahvaz (Iran), Abu Dhabi (UAE), and the Bahrain islands. Underwater archaeology in this region could be especially significant, potentially revealing early

settlements, trade networks, and cultural practices of the now-submerged Gulf Oasis, while enhancing heritage preservation and understanding of prehistoric adaptation to environmental change.

The Persian Gulf region these days faces a structural convergence of pressures: extreme heat, water scarcity, sea-level rise, rapid urbanization, and the long-term need for economic diversification beyond hydrocarbons. Rather than approaching these challenges through isolated national programs, a new phase of regional cooperation could transform environmental vulnerability into a platform for strategic collaboration. A coordinated agenda around water management, renewable energy, and climate resilience would not only mitigate risks but also reposition the Gulf as a global laboratory for arid-zone sustainability.

Marine ecosystems cover over 70% of the Earth and support an extraordinary diversity of life, from microscopic plankton to large whales. Coral reefs are among the most important marine habitats, providing shelter and food for about a quarter of all ocean species. However, reefs around the world, including the Great Barrier Reef, are experiencing severe bleaching due to rising ocean temperatures. Climate change, ocean acidification, pollution, and coastal development are major threats to coral health. Scientists estimate that roughly half of the world's coral reefs have already been lost. Overfishing is another serious problem, occurring when fish are caught faster than they can reproduce. About one-third of global fish stocks are currently overexploited, threatening food security and marine ecosystems. The collapse of the Atlantic cod fishery in the 1990s shows how overfishing can cause long-term ecological and economic damage. Overfishing also disrupts food chains and harms non-target species through bycatch. Protecting marine areas, reducing emissions, and promoting sustainable fishing are essential to preserve ocean life for the future.

The Persian Gulf is a shallow, semi-enclosed sea with unique marine biodiversity adapted to extreme heat and salinity. Its coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves support fish, turtles, and dugongs, but they are under significant stress. Rising sea temperatures linked to climate change have caused repeated coral bleaching events, with reefs in the Gulf already living close to their thermal limits. Coastal development, dredging, and land reclamation—especially near major urban hubs like Dubai—have damaged habitats and increased sedimentation. Pollution from oil production, shipping, and desalination plants further degrades water quality. Overfishing is a major challenge, with key commercial species such as Hammour (orange-spotted grouper) heavily depleted. Intensive fishing pressure, including small-scale and industrial operations, has reduced fish stocks and altered marine food webs. Bycatch and destructive fishing practices have also harmed turtles and other non-target species. Although Gulf states have introduced marine protected areas and seasonal fishing bans, enforcement and regional coordination remain uneven. Overall, the state of play in the Gulf is fragile, with ecosystems under pressure but still recoverable if stronger conservation, sustainable fisheries management, and climate adaptation measures are implemented collectively.

At the subregional level, the eight Gulf states (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) coordinate mainly through the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME), established under the Kuwait Convention (1978).

Here is how the key challenges are managed:

1. Regional environmental agreements

ROPME provides a legal framework for cooperation on pollution control, habitat protection, and emergency response. Member states agree on shared standards for marine protection and coordinate policies through regular ministerial meetings.

2. Marine pollution control

The Gulf has specific regional protocols for oil spill response, given its intense shipping and oil production activity. Countries cooperate on monitoring, contingency planning, and rapid-response systems for spills and industrial discharges.

3. Fisheries coordination

Fisheries management is addressed through shared research, stock assessments, and harmonisation of seasonal bans and gear restrictions. However, enforcement remains largely national, and there is no fully unified Gulf-wide fisheries authority.

4. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

States designate MPAs within their waters, and ROPME promotes ecological network planning at the regional scale. The goal is to improve connectivity between coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves across borders.

5. Monitoring and data sharing

Regional marine monitoring programs track water quality, coral bleaching, and biodiversity trends. Data-sharing platforms aim to improve early warning systems for environmental stress.

6. Climate adaptation collaboration

There is growing cooperation on coral resilience research, including studies on heat-tolerant Gulf coral species. Some joint scientific initiatives focus on ecosystem restoration and blue carbon strategies.

Overall assessment

Subregional management exists and is institutionally structured, but it faces challenges: uneven enforcement capacity, geopolitical tensions, data gaps, and heavy economic dependence on oil and fisheries. While frameworks are in place, stronger compliance mechanisms, integrated fisheries governance, and coordinated climate adaptation strategies are needed to significantly improve the Gulf's environmental outlook. So this is an area where the EU could intervene with corrective actions.

The second flagship initiative could be the creation of a Persian Gulf Water Sustainability Network. Water scarcity is the defining ecological constraint of the region, and groundwater depletion combined with high desalination dependency creates systemic fragility. A transboundary framework for data-sharing, aquifer monitoring, and policy coordination would

improve transparency and reduce duplication of investments. Joint financing of advanced desalination technologies, particularly energy-efficient and renewable-powered systems, would allow economies of scale while reducing carbon intensity. A useful model is the water cooperation framework between Jordan and Israel, which demonstrates that even politically sensitive environments can sustain practical water-sharing arrangements when mutual security and economic benefits are clearly defined. The institutional lesson is that water cooperation can precede and even facilitate broader political trust.

In parallel, the establishment of a Persian Gulf Renewable Energy Innovation Consortium would leverage the region's extraordinary solar irradiance and emerging offshore wind potential. The consortium could coordinate regulatory harmonization, grid interconnection planning, and joint research into high-temperature photovoltaic efficiency and concentrated solar power adapted to desert conditions. A shared approach to green hydrogen certification and export standards would position the Gulf as a long-term supplier to European and Asian markets. The policy sequencing of the German energy transition offers a valuable reference. The Energiewende in Germany illustrates how regulatory certainty, public investment, and grid modernization can accelerate renewable scaling while attracting private capital. While the Gulf's economic structure differs significantly, the governance logic of coordinated incentives and infrastructure planning remains transferable.

A third initiative could focus on integrated water-energy nexus hubs in major coastal cities. These hubs would combine solar- or wind-powered desalination, wastewater recycling, district cooling, and smart-grid optimization within a single infrastructure ecosystem. By integrating systems that are traditionally planned separately, operational efficiency would increase while emissions decline. The experience of the Seawater Desalination Plant in Perth demonstrates how renewable energy procurement can be structurally embedded into water production contracts, reducing both environmental footprint and long-term energy volatility. The Gulf's dense coastal urbanization makes such integrated planning particularly viable.

Urban climate resilience should form the fourth pillar of cooperation. A Persian Gulf Climate-Resilient Cities Initiative could support standardized risk assessments, coastal defense planning, heat-mitigation strategies, and green infrastructure deployment. Mangrove restoration and blue-carbon ecosystems would provide both adaptation and mitigation benefits. Singapore offers an instructive benchmark. The city-state's integrated water strategy, including NEWater recycling and advanced flood management, demonstrates how a resource-constrained environment can transform vulnerability into technological leadership. Similarly, the Delta Programme in the Netherlands provides a model for long-term sea-level adaptation through anticipatory governance and sustained public investment.

A fifth collaborative track could center on a Regional Green Hydrogen Corridor. Solar-powered electrolysis facilities linked to export terminals would create a new decarbonized value chain compatible with existing port and logistics infrastructure. Cross-border pipeline planning and shared certification standards would reduce fragmentation and attract institutional investors. The European Hydrogen Backbone initiative provides a governance template for multinational infrastructure coordination, demonstrating how early planning of regulatory compatibility and transport networks reduces future transaction costs.

Beyond infrastructure, durable success depends on institutional enablers. A shared regional data platform would allow harmonized monitoring of groundwater depletion, emissions, and climate risk exposure. A Gulf green finance facility, potentially issuing regional green bonds, would mobilize sovereign wealth funds and private capital around jointly defined sustainability targets. An innovation exchange network linking universities and technical institutes would cultivate the human capital necessary for long-term transformation.

The strategic benefit of such cooperation is multidimensional. Economically, it accelerates diversification and creates high-technology industrial ecosystems. Environmentally, it reduces emissions and enhances resilience to extreme heat and sea-level rise. Politically, it builds functional interdependence around non-zero-sum goods, potentially strengthening regional stability. In geopolitical terms, it repositions the Persian Gulf from a hydrocarbon-dependent system to a climate-adaptive energy and water innovation hub.

If developed coherently, these collaborative projects would not merely mitigate environmental stress. They could redefine the region's development model for the twenty-first century, demonstrating that even one of the world's most water-stressed and heat-exposed regions can lead in renewable energy deployment, integrated resource management, and climate governance.

Table

Region	Institutionalization	Security Cooperation	Economic Integration & Trade	Environmental & Sustainability Coordination	Networked Governance / Multilateralism
Red Sea	Low; primarily intergovernmental	High; anti-piracy, navigation safety	Moderate; major ports, trade corridors	Low; minimal regional frameworks	Limited; bilateral agreements dominate
Persian Gulf	Medium; GCC-led, state-centered	High; coordinated naval and port security	High; joint infrastructure, shipping hubs	Low to medium; environmental measures emerging	Medium; functional, but state-hierarchical
Caspian Sea	Low; intergovernmental, sovereignty-constrained	Low; minimal coordinated maritime security	Medium; hydrocarbon transport focused	Medium; some multilateral agreements	Low; bilateral agreements dominate
Panama Canal	High operational centralization	Low; security managed internally	Very high; global trade chokepoint	Medium; regulated canal operations	Low; not a multi-state cooperative system
Northern Sea Route	Medium; state-led by Russia	Medium; limited patrolling and navigation controls	Medium; developing shipping access	Medium; environmental regulations emerging	Low; limited multilateral involvement
Malacca Strait	Low; functional coordination among littoral states	High; trilateral anti-piracy patrols	High; critical trade route	Medium; cooperative environmental measures	Medium; networked functional governance

Across the six maritime regions, several notable patterns emerge. Security cooperation is consistently robust in strategic chokepoints and high-traffic maritime corridors, exemplified by the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Malacca Strait, reflecting both the geopolitical sensitivity of these waterways and the concentration of commercial traffic. Institutionalization, by contrast, exhibits significant variation: centralized operational management characterizes the Panama Canal, ensuring efficiency and global reliability, whereas multi-state coordination remains limited in regions such as the Caspian Sea and the Northern Sea Route, where sovereignty disputes and emergent infrastructure constrain collective action.

Economic integration aligns closely with strategic trade significance, reaching its peak in globally pivotal corridors including Panama, Malacca, and the Persian Gulf, where port infrastructure, shipping networks, and regional trade facilitation mechanisms amplify connectivity and economic interdependence. Environmental and sustainability coordination, however, remains comparatively underdeveloped across most regions, with notable exceptions in areas where multilateral functional networks operate, such as Malacca and segments of the Caspian Sea, highlighting the role of cooperative frameworks in addressing ecological concerns.

Networked governance proves most effective when functional cooperation coheres with both economic and security imperatives. In the Malacca Strait and Persian Gulf, for instance, integrated maritime patrols, collaborative port management, and trade facilitation initiatives demonstrate how interdependence can catalyze robust governance even in contexts of partial institutionalization. Collectively, these observations underscore that the strength of maritime regionalism is contingent not solely on formal institutional structures but on the alignment of strategic, economic, and functional incentives, offering a nuanced framework for comparative evaluation and potential policy transfer across maritime corridors.

26. STAKEHOLDER VOICES ON REGIONAL SECURITY

Discussions of regional security in the Persian Gulf have historically centered on state actors, military balances, and external guarantors. Yet a growing body of practice and scholarship recognizes that durable security architectures increasingly depend on the structured participation of civil society, academia, and the private sector. In a region where environmental stress, economic transition, and technological transformation intersect with geopolitical rivalry, non-state actors are not peripheral; they are constitutive of long-term stability.

Civil society organizations across the Gulf have begun engaging security through environmental and social lenses. In Kuwait, the Kuwait Environment Protection Society has contributed to public debates on marine degradation and oil spill risks, framing ecological protection as a matter of national resilience. In Bahrain, local environmental associations have participated in consultations on coastal development and climate adaptation. In Oman, community-based initiatives around water conservation and aflaj heritage preservation link cultural continuity with environmental security. Such actors rarely speak in the language of deterrence or alliance structures, yet their interventions address the underlying drivers of instability: resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and social vulnerability. By institutionalizing channels for civil society participation in regional dialogues—particularly on

water management, food security, and climate adaptation—the Gulf could broaden its definition of security beyond hard power metrics.

Academic institutions across the region are already embedded in strategic debates. Qatar University hosts research on energy transitions and maritime security in the Gulf. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology has become a regional hub for desalination research, renewable energy systems, and Red Sea ecosystem resilience. United Arab Emirates University conducts work on climate modeling and sustainable urban planning relevant to Gulf megacities. Beyond the Gulf proper, institutions such as Georgetown University in Qatar contribute policy-oriented analysis on regional geopolitics and diplomacy. These universities function as epistemic communities that can provide scenario modeling, risk assessments, and technical roadmaps that depoliticize sensitive topics by grounding them in evidence. Formalizing a Persian Gulf Academic Security Network could facilitate joint research on transboundary water systems, maritime domain awareness, and renewable infrastructure protection, reducing duplication and fostering shared situational awareness.

The private sector, particularly energy and logistics firms, is central to any realistic discussion of Gulf security. National energy companies such as Saudi Aramco, QatarEnergy, and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company manage infrastructure that is both economically indispensable and strategically sensitive. Their investments in carbon capture, hydrogen, and renewable integration have security implications insofar as they shape economic diversification and reduce exposure to fossil-fuel volatility. Meanwhile, port operators such as DP World oversee maritime nodes critical to global supply chains. Disruption in these sectors—whether from cyberattacks, climate shocks, or geopolitical escalation—has immediate regional and global consequences. Structured public–private security dialogues, including joint cyber-resilience exercises and climate-risk stress testing, would embed infrastructure operators directly into the regional security architecture.

Business councils and chambers of commerce also play a stabilizing role. Cross-border trade forums between United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, or between Qatar and Oman, reinforce economic interdependence that can mitigate escalation incentives. Economic interdependence does not eliminate rivalry, but it alters cost-benefit calculations. When private capital is regionally diversified and supply chains are intertwined, stability becomes a shared economic asset rather than a purely political abstraction.

Integrating civil society, academia, and the private sector into regional security discussions requires institutional innovation. A Gulf Climate and Security Forum could convene environmental NGOs, research institutes, sovereign wealth funds, and infrastructure operators alongside foreign and defense ministries. Track-two dialogues hosted by universities would enable more candid exchanges on maritime incidents, water stress, or renewable grid interconnection. Corporate sustainability reporting standards could be aligned regionally to include climate-risk disclosure, linking market transparency with strategic resilience.

The normative shift underlying such inclusion is significant. Security would no longer be defined solely by military deterrence or alliance commitments, but by resilience of water systems, energy grids, digital networks, and urban infrastructures. Civil society brings legitimacy and local knowledge. Academia contributes analytical rigor and scenario planning.

The private sector provides operational capacity and capital. Together, these actors form a broader security ecosystem capable of addressing both traditional threats and the structural risks of climate change, economic transition, and technological disruption.

In the Persian Gulf, where environmental pressures and geopolitical complexity intersect, embedding these constituencies into structured regional dialogue is not a peripheral reform. It is a precondition for a durable, twenty-first-century conception of security.

27. Case-Studies

Khuzestan, in southwestern Iran, occupies one of the most geopolitically sensitive and economically vital regions in the Middle East, yet its significance is often overlooked in broader analyses. Nestled between the Persian Gulf, southern Iraq, and the northern Kurdish regions of both Iraq and Iran, Khuzestan serves as a strategic land and maritime bridge linking these areas. Its border with Iraq makes it a natural corridor for cross-border trade, energy pipelines, and military logistics, while its proximity to the Gulf provides Iran with direct access to global shipping lanes, particularly for its vast oil and gas exports.

Economically, Khuzestan is exceptionally rich. It contains Iran's largest oil fields, including the Ahvaz field, and is a center for heavy industry and petrochemical production. Fertile river plains, nourished by the Karun River, support agriculture and add to the province's food security and economic diversity. Despite this wealth, Khuzestan's strategic importance is often underestimated because analyses frequently focus on Tehran, the Gulf itself, or the Kurdish north.

Politically and socially, Khuzestan is a complex mosaic of Arab, Persian, Bakhtiari, and Lur communities. Its ethnic diversity, combined with economic centrality, makes it a potential flashpoint for unrest, especially given historical grievances over resource distribution and local autonomy. From a security standpoint, Khuzestan is critical for Iran's defense of its southern borders, its energy infrastructure, and its influence over cross-border movements into southern Iraq and the Kurdish regions.

In essence, Khuzestan is both a gateway and a buffer: it connects Iran to Iraq and the Gulf, underpins the Iranian economy with its oil wealth, and sits at the intersection of regional trade and security dynamics. Its resources and strategic position mean that control and stability in Khuzestan directly affect Iranian influence in Iraq, the Gulf, and northern Middle Eastern corridors, making it far more important than often acknowledged.

Figure

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On the assumption that the borders between Iraq and Kuwait are clearly delineated, something the EU and GCC have committed themselves to in their joint Summit declaration, this could further strengthen the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, characterized by increased trust, enhanced security cooperation, and greater political stability. It would reduce the risk of territorial disputes and encourage joint initiatives in energy, water, and infrastructure development. Economic collaboration could expand through coordinated cross-border trade and investment projects. Shared energy projects, such as regional electricity grids and gas pipelines, would become more feasible and reliable. The clear border would facilitate smoother logistics and transport links, boosting commerce. It could also support cooperative defense planning and intelligence sharing, enhancing regional security. Diplomatic ties would likely deepen, enabling more effective coordination in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiatives. A stable Iraq-Kuwait border reduces external tensions, allowing Saudi-Kuwaiti relations to focus on long-term strategic development. Trust in border management could encourage collaborative environmental and water management projects. Overall, it would create a more predictable, cooperative, and mutually beneficial framework for bilateral and regional engagement.

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The EU should consider targeted investments in Shush, Khuzestan, leveraging its historical and geographic significance as a gateway between southern Iraq, the Kurdish regions, and the Persian Gulf. Investment should focus on technologies that enhance connectivity, resilience, and economic diversification. Modernization of oil and gas facilities, alongside renewable energy technologies such as solar, wind, and smart grids, can reduce environmental impact and increase energy export efficiency. Given the Karun River and surrounding agricultural lands, precision irrigation, desalination, and flood control technologies can increase productivity and sustainability. Upgrading port infrastructure in Shush-linked corridors to Iraq and the Gulf, including automated cargo handling, supply chain digitization, and cross-border trade facilitation, can strengthen regional logistics. Supporting cleaner, more efficient petrochemical processes and industrial digitization can modernize existing heavy industries while reducing environmental risks. Investments in broadband, AI-based urban planning, and local innovation hubs can position Shush as a regional technology center, attracting talent and facilitating EU–Middle East collaboration. Shush's historical significance as Susa can also be leveraged through digital heritage platforms, augmented reality, and immersive tourism solutions, linking cultural preservation with economic development. Overall, these investments would transform Shush into a strategic node connecting Europe to the Gulf and Iraq, boosting technological adoption, regional stability, and sustainable growth.

The Ramsar Convention is an international treaty established in 1971 to conserve wetlands of international importance and promote their sustainable use. It covers all types of wetlands, including marshes, mangroves, peatlands, lakes, rivers, estuaries, coastal zones, and even human-made wetlands like rice paddies, reservoirs, and salt pans. Its core objectives are the conservation of wetland ecosystems, the promotion of wise use practices that benefit both nature and local communities, and fostering international cooperation, particularly for transboundary wetlands and migratory species. Countries that are parties to the Convention designate Ramsar Sites, wetlands of international importance, which are prioritized for protection and management. The Convention recognizes wetlands as vital habitats for waterfowl and other biodiversity, and it acknowledges the ecosystem services they provide, including flood control, water purification, carbon storage, fisheries, and cultural value. Parties are required to monitor the ecological character of designated sites and report changes to ensure effective management. Governance under Ramsar relies on national wetland authorities or focal points in each member state, which coordinate policy, planning, and conservation activities, supported by reporting obligations and technical guidance from the Ramsar Secretariat.

In the Persian Gulf, several countries are both Ramsar and ROPME parties, creating potential synergies between wetland and marine protection frameworks. Ramsar emphasizes the conservation of coastal wetlands, mangroves, and mudflats, which are also critical for marine biodiversity and fisheries targeted by ROPME. By aligning monitoring, reporting, and management strategies, countries can coordinate pollution control, habitat restoration, and

species protection across both treaties. For example, a mangrove area designated as a Ramsar Site can simultaneously serve as part of a regional marine protected area under ROPME, helping address coastal erosion, fish nursery protection, and water quality. These synergies enhance governance by linking terrestrial and marine conservation, promoting integrated ecosystem management, and strengthening compliance through shared scientific data and regional cooperation mechanisms.

The European Union can play a pivotal role in strengthening governance at the Ramsar Secretariat through policy support and technical guidance. By sharing experiences from the Natura 2000 network, the EU can help streamline reporting, compliance, and adaptive management across Ramsar sites. Financial instruments such as LIFE and Horizon Europe enable capacity building, monitoring, and project implementation in wetland conservation. Promoting international standards like the IUCN Green List ensures that governance is effective, transparent, and equitable. Regional cooperation, particularly through ROPME, can be enhanced by EU support for knowledge sharing and institutional capacity. The Khuran Straits in Iran host critical wetland ecosystems, vital for many threatened species and migratory birds. Among these species are the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin , finless porpoise , and dugong , all listed as vulnerable by the IUCN. Wetland birds such as pelicans and marbled teals also depend on the ecological integrity of these habitats.

Figure Dugongs are Herbivores

The Mubarak Al-Kabeer Reserve in Kuwait supports globally significant bird populations, including the crab plover and slender-billed gull. These wetlands serve as essential stopover points for migratory waders and other coastal species. Highlighting the scientific and cultural importance of Khuran and Mubarak Al-Kabeer strengthens international recognition and support. Implementing Ramsar-METT and Green List standards can enhance governance, management, and transparency in both sites. Collaborative GIS platforms linking ROPME, Ramsar, and national datasets improve decision-making and conservation outcomes.

Partnerships with IUCN, UNEP, and BirdLife International amplify visibility and attract technical and financial resources.

The Iraqi Marshes are a vast wetland ecosystem in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran, located at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers near the Persian Gulf. Historically covering 15,000–20,000 km. They consist of three main, interconnected areas: the Al-Hawizeh, Central, and Al-Hammar marshes, which drain into the Persian Gulf. Known for supporting a unique, 5,000-year-old culture known as the Marsh Arabs (Ma'dan), who live in reed houses, herd buffalo, and fish. The marshes are a major, vital habitat for migratory birds and various fish species, acting as a natural filter for the gulf. In the 1990s, roughly 90% of the marshes were drained for political reasons by Saddam Hussein, reducing them to 7% of their original size.While partial restoration occurred after 2003, the ecosystem remains highly threatened by drought, damming, pollution, and water scarcity. They are a crucial, ancient ecosystem for biodiversity and the Marsh Arab culture.

The Iraqi Marshlands were severely drained in the 1990s but have partially recovered since 2003. Recovery is uneven, with some areas still degraded or fragmented. Biodiversity is returning, but water scarcity, pollution, and high salinity continue to threaten plants and animals. Climate change and reduced river inflows exacerbate seasonal drying and ecosystem stress. The marshes remain culturally vital for the Marsh Arabs, though many communities have been permanently displaced. The UN and the Ramsar Convention can coordinate on the Iraqi Marshlands through joint monitoring of ecosystems and water quality. They can align Ramsar's conservation guidelines with Iraq's national policies. The UN can fund and support capacity-building for local communities in sustainable water and habitat management. Together, they can secure international funding for restoration projects while ensuring best practices. Coordinated advocacy can raise awareness of the marshes' ecological and cultural importance. The European Union (EU) could support the Iraqi Marshlands by providing funding for restoration projects and sustainable water management. It could share technical expertise in wetland conservation and climate adaptation. The EU can help build local capacity through training programs for communities and authorities. It can facilitate partnerships between Iraq, the UN, and Ramsar for coordinated conservation efforts. Finally, the EU can promote international awareness and advocacy for the marshes' ecological and cultural importance.

Iran's counterpart would be to address the challenges of the Shadegan ponds to ensure a balance ecological restoration with community needs, ensuring that they remains both a healthy ecosystem and a sustainable resource base for locals. The interventions concerns the reduced water levels due to upstream dams and water diversions, which calls for environmental flow policies and regulated dam releases. Restoration of small channels and ponds can help maintain water distribution and prevent drying of critical wetland areas. Pollution from agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, and urban waste threatens water quality, making buffer zones and sustainable farming practices essential. Enforcing industrial discharge regulations and monitoring water quality can reduce chemical contamination.

Figure Marsh Reed houses
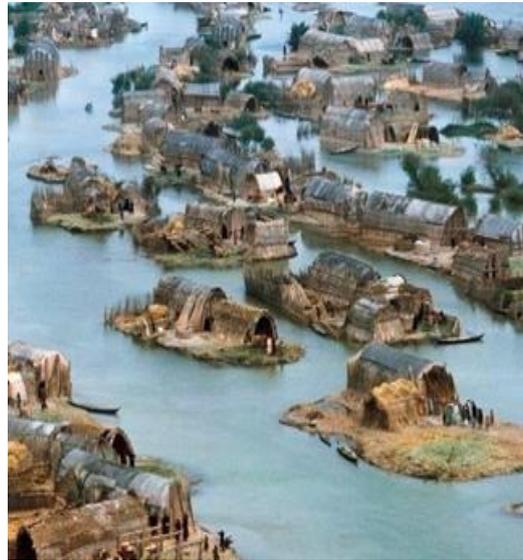
Habitat loss, hunting, and invasive species threaten biodiversity, which can be mitigated through protected areas and species management. Community engagement is crucial, including sustainable fishing, reed harvesting, and eco-tourism initiatives to support local livelihoods. Governance improvements, integrated wetland management plans, and scientific monitoring are needed for effective conservation. Collaboration with international organizations can provide technical and financial support, ensuring Shadegan ponds remain ecologically healthy and socially beneficial.

Engaging local communities through ecotourism and sustainable livelihoods fosters stewardship and long-term site protection. Aligning conservation efforts with sustainable development goals demonstrates their broader societal benefits. International conferences and awareness campaigns can showcase these sites as models of Persian Gulf wetland conservation. Visual media highlighting threatened species helps generate global attention and funding support. EU-backed initiatives can link regional governance, research, and conservation to build resilient, well-managed wetlands. Together, these measures promote effective governance, species protection, and sustainable stewardship of Persian Gulf Ramsar sites.

Ras Al Khaiman – Musandam Peninsula

Ras al-Khaimah, located at the northernmost tip of the United Arab Emirates peninsula, occupies a strategically significant position in the Gulf region. Geographically, it sits between the rest of the UAE to the south and Oman's Musandam exclave to the east, forming a corridor along the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. Its coastline projects into the Persian Gulf, giving it both strategic maritime access and a vantage point for regional trade and naval movement.

The emirate's position as a shared geographic protrusion into the Persian Gulf amplifies its importance for commercial shipping, energy transit, and regional security, particularly given its proximity to major Gulf shipping lanes. Historically, Ras al-Khaimah's location has made it a gateway for trade and a buffer zone between different tribal and political entities in the northern Gulf, connecting the UAE with Oman and the broader Gulf region.

Economically, the emirate benefits from ports, industrial zones, and free trade infrastructure, enabling it to serve as a hub for logistics and maritime commerce. Its location also provides strategic leverage in regional diplomacy and security coordination, as it sits on the periphery of the UAE yet near critical chokepoints leading into the Gulf and Indian Ocean.

In short, Ras al-Khaimah's combination of maritime projection, border adjacency, and economic infrastructure positions it as a key node for both regional integration within the UAE and broader Gulf connectivity, bridging the Gulf, Oman, and international shipping routes.

Ras al-Khaimah and northwest Oman sit on critical maritime routes linking the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and onward to India. The EU could leverage this position by supporting integrated port modernization and logistics projects, creating efficient hubs in Ras al-Khaimah and Musandam that link directly with major Indian ports like Mumbai and Kandla, ensuring seamless trade flows for energy, goods, and industrial inputs.

Energy and resource corridors could be developed, including renewable energy initiatives, desalination technology, and energy transit pipelines, to supply regional and Indian markets sustainably. EU-backed infrastructure financing could connect industrial zones in Ras al-Khaimah and Oman with trade corridors into the UAE, Iraq, and Iran, enabling multi-directional trade routes between Europe, the Middle East, and India.

Digital and smart technologies could integrate these corridors: EU investment in AI-based logistics, port automation, and customs digitization would streamline cross-border trade, improving efficiency for EU, Gulf, and Indian businesses. In parallel, education, innovation, and maritime training programs could cultivate talent to manage these corridors, fostering EU-India-Middle East collaboration.

Sustainable tourism and cultural exchange initiatives could complement the trade and industrial strategy, leveraging historic sites, eco-tourism, and heritage hubs in Ras al-Khaimah, Musandam, and coastal Oman to attract investment and build soft influence.

The EU's stake in this corridor is multi-dimensional. Economically, Europe relies on stable, efficient trade routes for energy, raw materials, and manufactured goods; securing access through Ras al-Khaimah and Musandam ensures reliable supply chains connecting the Gulf to India and Europe. Investment in ports, logistics hubs, and industrial zones allows EU companies to expand markets, diversify sourcing, and participate in regional value chains.

Strategically, the corridor enhances EU influence in the northern Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, enabling Europe to engage as a partner in regional infrastructure, maritime security, and

trade facilitation without relying solely on US or Gulf intermediaries. The EU can promote standards in green energy, smart infrastructure, and digital governance, shaping regional norms and technological adoption in ways consistent with EU policy and sustainability goals.

Figure Map

Politically, engagement strengthens partnerships with Gulf states and India, creating a cooperative triangle that supports stability, regional conflict mitigation, and multilateral dialogue, while providing a counterbalance to other global actors active in the region. By fostering economic interconnectivity, innovation hubs, and cultural collaboration, the EU builds long-term influence in a corridor that links Europe to Middle Eastern and South Asian markets.

In short, the EU's stake is to secure trade and energy flows, project normative and technological influence, and reinforce regional stability, using Ras al-Khaimah and northwest Oman as key nodes in a transregional Europe–Middle East–India corridor.

We recall, when the United Arab Emirates was formed in December 1971, the UK had been withdrawing from its protectorate over the Trucial States. Britain had previously recognized the claims of local rulers over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb. Just before the UAE's formation, Iran moved to assert its historical claims and occupied all three islands on 30 November 1971. A last-minute memorandum allowed for joint administration of Abu Musa, but in practice Iran took control. The UAE has disputed Iran's occupation ever since. This was not a simple exchange or allotment "in return" for anything from Iran. The situation reflects Britain's withdrawal, Iran's assertion of sovereignty, and ongoing territorial disputes inherited by the UAE. Abu Musa remains partially administered under the 1971 agreement, while the Tunbs are fully controlled by Iran. The episode shaped UAE-Iran relations and remains a sensitive geopolitical issue in the Gulf. It also illustrates how the end of British influence left unresolved territorial claims.

The islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb do not have significant oil or gas reserves themselves; their value is mainly strategic, controlling the Strait of Hormuz through which much of the world's oil transits. Abu Musa has minor exploration potential, while the

Tunbs are small and largely rocky, with minimal natural resources. Their importance lies in maritime control and territorial sovereignty, rather than direct resource extraction. This makes them crucial for regional security, shipping, and influence over Gulf oil exports. Iran is assisting both Ethiopia and Sudan with intelligence and drones, whereas UAE and Israel have teamed up on Somaliland causing a major rift between KSA and UAE. This suggests proxy dynamics are entering the two Persian Gulf countries' conflict of interest do the detriment of Arab brotherhood and GCC cohesion.

The European Union (EU) has a strong interest in the stability of these waters, as disruption could affect global energy markets and international trade. The EU supports freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and encourages diplomatic solutions to disputes over the islands to ensure uninterrupted shipping. European energy security and Gulf trade relationships link the EU's position directly to the islands' status. Stabilizing the territorial situation benefits not only the UAE and Iran but also global energy supply chains, in which the EU is heavily invested. Overall, while the islands themselves are not major oil producers, their geopolitical and economic impact extends far beyond the region.
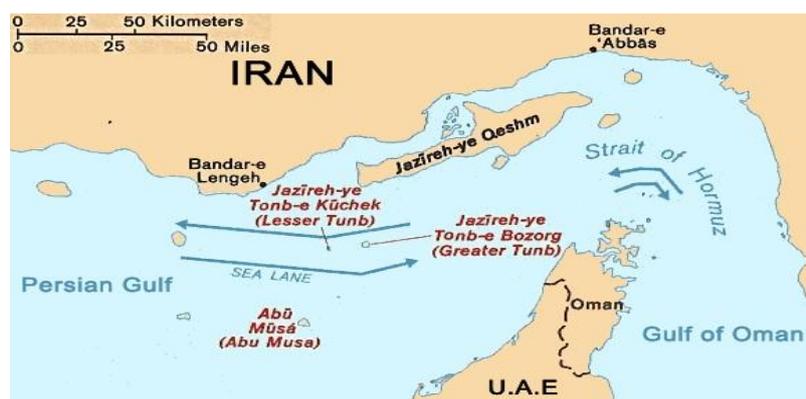
Now, Iran has advanced the idea that the United Arab Emirates could leverage its substantial geoeconomic influence to facilitate broader regional development, promote trade and investment across the Arab Peninsula, and act as a catalyst for economic integration. This approach envisions the UAE not only as a financial and commercial hub but we might add could also facilitate the rise of Abu Dhabi as a strategic partner in strengthening institutional and gover-nance frameworks within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). By combining its economic capabilities with diplomatic engagement, the UAE could help harmonize regulatory standards, enhance transparency, and encourage sustainable investment practices across member states. Iran's proposal implicitly recognizes the UAE's capacity to bridge regional economic initiatives and promote stability through coordinated development, while simultaneously supporting the GCC in consolidating its political and economic cohesion. In this framework, the UAE's geoeconomic levers—ranging from capital markets and infrastructure expertise to trade networks—could be aligned with Iran's vision of mutually beneficial engagement, potentially reducing regional rivalries and fostering collaborative growth.

Next, softening enmities in the UAE with its significant Farsi-speaking population requires promoting cultural understanding, such as festivals, language programs, and community dialogues. Economic integration through inclusive workforce policies and joint business

ventures can create shared interests. Diplomatic and policy measures—like non-confrontational media, legal representation, and careful engagement with Iran—help reduce tensions. Education and media initiatives, including bilingual programs and balanced reporting, foster respect and understanding. Grassroots and religious cooperation, such as interfaith projects and youth engagement, build trust at the community level. The overarching goal is integration without assimilation, ensuring Farsi-speaking residents feel included socially, economically, and civically, while celebrating shared Gulf identity. Over time, these measures reduce historical or political enmities and strengthen social cohesion.

Addressing UAE-Iran rivalry requires both direct (state-to-state) and indirect (regional politics and soft power) approaches. A combination of diplomatic, economic, and security strategies helps reduce tensions and build cooperation. Clarifying and managing territorial disputes over Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb lowers core sources of tension. Negotiated frameworks or international legal mechanisms can provide peaceful solutions to these disputes. Strengthening diplomatic channels through high-level dialogue and fully operational embassies prevents misunderstandings. Crisis hotlines between governments allow rapid de-escalation during potential conflicts. Boosting trade and economic integration ties both countries' prosperity to regional stability. The UAE's role as one of Iran's largest trade partners creates mutual incentives for cooperation. Institutionalizing joint economic projects, such as ports, logistics corridors, and energy collaborations, builds routine cooperation.

Cooperation in sectors like tourism, energy, and climate response aligns strategic interests. People-to-people and cultural exchanges, including festivals and educational programs, reduce stereotypes and improve perceptions. Neutral regional forums like the GCC, Arab League, or UN can address shared challenges collectively. Refraining from supporting opposing proxy groups prevents indirect escalation of influence struggles. Confidence-building measures, including military transparency and shared patrols in the Strait of Hormuz, reduce risk of conflict. Joint management of shared resources, such as energy infrastructure and trade corridors, promotes cooperative governance. Environmental and infrastructure projects can shift competition to collaboration. Engaging neutral external partners like Oman, European governments, or ASEAN observers can bridge trust gaps. Mediation and guarantees from third parties help strengthen security assurances. A comprehensive strategy combining conflict resolution, economic interdependence, cultural ties, and institutional cooperation is essential. Over time, these measures can shift the UAE-Iran relationship from strategic rivalry to stable, predictable, and mutually beneficial engagement.

Clearly, this is not something the parties will dare to embark upon overnight, but solving the problems by not speaking about them would solve them either.

JAZAN

Jazan Province faces significant geopolitical and security challenges due to its location near the Yemen border, which exposes it to regional tensions and potential cross-border conflicts. This proximity affects investment, mobility, and the long-term stability of the region. Infrastructure and connectivity remain constrained, limiting efficient transportation and logistics despite ongoing development efforts. The port facilities, while modernized, still require better hinterland connections to maximize trade potential.

The Jazan Region is predominantly inhabited by Sunni Muslims, mainly following the Shafi'i school, known for a systematic approach that balances textual evidence (Qur'an/Sunnah) with legal reasoning with a respectable pedigree in Islamic jurisprudence. Sunnis form the vast majority of the population and dominate the social, religious, and political life of the region. There is a small minority of Zaydi Shia Muslims, mostly concentrated in rural or mountainous areas near the border with Yemen. These Zaydi communities, adherents to the Fiver-Immanate with an emphasis of an active and just Immanate fighting unjust rulers share cultural and religious ties with northern Yemen, where Zaydism is more widespread. Compared to Sunnis, Zaydis in Jazan are few in number and have limited influence. Their presence, however, reflects historical migration and cross-border tribal connections. The coexistence of these groups has generally been peaceful, but regional conflicts can sometimes heighten sensitivities. Overall, Jazan's religious landscape is overwhelmingly Sunni, with Zaydi Shia forming a small, localized minority. The Shafi Sunni and Zaydi Shia are traditionally close to each other in doctrine and outlook on both sides of the Yemeni-Saudi border.

Environmental and landscape degradation is another pressing concern, with rapid coastal development threatening ecological balance. Tourism and urban expansion have put stress on natural habitats, compromising biodiversity and scenic value. Economic diversification is an ongoing challenge, as the region's economy is still tied to traditional sectors and oil-linked markets. Efforts to expand agriculture, industry, and tourism have made progress but are not yet fully resilient to economic fluctuations. High youth unemployment continues to be a major social issue, necessitating better integration of local labor into emerging industries. Skills development and education programs need strengthening to prepare the workforce for new sectors. Sustainable resource management is critical, particularly water scarcity and desertification, which threaten agriculture and food security.

Climate change and extreme weather events pose risks to infrastructure and livelihoods in both urban and rural areas. Balancing rapid modernization with the preservation of cultural heritage and social norms is a delicate task. The province must integrate traditional practices with contemporary development to maintain social cohesion.

Attracting foreign investment remains a challenge, requiring improvements in regulatory clarity, institutional coordination, and investment incentives. Industrial zones and the special economic zone have potential but need strategic planning to ensure effective outcomes. Ensuring that growth is inclusive across all population segments is essential for long-term stability and prosperity. Public services and housing development must keep pace with population growth to avoid social disparities. Maintaining environmental sustainability alongside industrial and urban expansion is a critical balancing act.

Figure Jazan

Overall, Jazan's strategic challenges span security, economic diversification, environmental management, social development, and regional integration, all of which must be addressed to achieve sustainable and resilient growth.

1. GCC-EU Center for Sustainable Education and Research

Establish a leading educational institution in Jazan focusing on lifelong learning, reskilling sustainable urban design, climate resilience, and technology innovation. The center would be a collaborative effort between the EU and KSA, offering joint degree programs, research labs, and innovation hubs to train a skilled workforce capable of leading green and sustainable development in the GCC region.

2. Sustainable Urban Development Program

Collaboration on model cities and urban districts in KSA and GCC countries that integrate smart infrastructure, water efficiency, sustainable transport, and heritage-sensitive architecture. EU urban planners and KSA developers could co-design pilot districts to showcase sustainable, inclusive, and climate-resilient urban living.

3. Advanced Logistics and Trade Corridor Network

Modernizing ports, railways, and road networks linking KSA, GCC countries, and EU trading partners. This project would improve connectivity, facilitate supply chains for goods and energy, and strengthen Jazan, Dammam, and other strategic ports as regional logistics hubs.

4. Flood Management and Water-Food-Energy Nexus Project

A comprehensive initiative to manage flood risks in regions like Jazan while integrating water, food, and energy planning. It would include smart flood early-warning systems, resilient infrastructure, sustainable irrigation, renewable-powered desalination, and energy-efficient water distribution, ensuring climate adaptation and food security.

5. Knowledge and Innovation Partnership

A multi-sector collaboration between EU and KSA universities, tech hubs, and research centers to foster R&D in AI, biotech, renewable energy, and cultural heritage preservation. The initiative would include scholarships, joint research programs, and innovation incubators to develop a skilled workforce aligned with Vision 2030.

DHOFAR

Oman shares a long border with Yemen, making it vulnerable to spillover of conflict and security threats. The war has increased risks of arms smuggling, militant infiltration, and cross-border crime. Oman has had to strengthen border security and deploy resources to monitor the frontier. Some displaced Yemenis have sought temporary refuge or work in Oman, creating a modest humanitarian burden. Cross-border trade with Yemen has been disrupted, affecting goods like food and livestock. Regional instability has impacted shipping lanes and oil-related trade, indirectly influencing Oman's economy. Foreign investment near southern Oman is discouraged due to proximity to conflict zones. Oman has maintained a neutral stance, positioning itself as a mediator between warring parties. Its diplomatic role enhances Oman's regional credibility but requires careful balancing with neighbors like Saudi Arabia. Overall, Oman faces security, economic, and humanitarian challenges while gaining influence as a stabilizing presence in the region.

In Dhofar, Oman faced a major insurgency known as the Dhofar Rebellion from the 1960s to 1976, led by the Marxist-inspired PFLOAG. The rebellion was driven by local grievances, including poverty and social marginalization. Sultan Qaboos combined military campaigns with development projects, improving education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Support from British, Iranian, and allied forces helped suppress the insurgency. By 1976, the rebellion was defeated, and Dhofar became more stable and integrated into Oman's national framework.

The war in Yemen has revived concerns in Oman about spillovers of conflict, including militant infiltration, smuggling, and instability along its southern border. In response, Oman has actively increased its presence and operations in the border regions to monitor security and prevent incursions. The government has strengthened border patrols, enhanced surveillance, and coordinated with local communities to maintain stability. Oman also balances these security measures with humanitarian support for displaced Yemenis near the frontier. Overall, the conflict has prompted Oman to be more proactive in securing its borders while maintaining its neutral and mediating role in the region.

The Mahari tribes, living across southern Yemen and Oman's Dhofar region, have strong cross-border ties and seasonal movements for grazing and trade. During the Yemen war, their mobility has raised concerns about spillovers, including potential militant infiltration. Oman monitors Mahari movements carefully, balancing security with respect for tribal autonomy. Their local influence makes them important in maintaining stability along the border. Overall, the Mahari play a key role in how Oman manages security and social cohesion near Yemen.

This historical context of cross-border tribal networks and security concerns in Yemen helps explain why Oman's experiences in Dhofar—where it once faced a major insurgency—remain relevant for managing stability along its southern frontier today.

Dhofar's rapid tourism growth, especially during the Khareef season, brings challenges in sustainable management of natural and cultural sites, requiring careful balance between environmental protection and visitor infrastructure expansion.

Seasonal tourism also strains local services and accommodation capacity, as visitors cluster around limited facilities, highlighting the need to diversify year round tourism offerings and expand quality lodging and amenities.

Despite significant investment and growth, infrastructure gaps remain, particularly in remote areas, where connectivity, road quality, and access to essential services can lag behind the region's development ambitions.

The geographically diverse landscape—from mountains to coastline—adds complexity to transport and logistics planning, making it harder to integrate hinterland communities into the broader economic framework.

Dhofar's economy still faces the challenge of diversifying beyond seasonal tourism and traditional agriculture, even as initiatives like agri tourism and expanded agricultural production seek to strengthen food security and year long economic activity.

Environmental pressures from increased development and human activity threaten the region's ecosystems, requiring stronger conservation programs and sustainable land use planning to protect biodiversity and natural heritage.

Attracting and maintaining foreign and domestic investment remains a challenge, with the region needing continued improvements in business environment, incentives, and regulatory clarity to ensure sustained confidence.

The seasonality of economic activity—with peaks during the monsoon months and quieter periods otherwise—makes planning for infrastructure, employment, and public services more complex. Food security and water resources management require strategic planning, especially as projects like the Al Najd agricultural hub indicate ongoing efforts to harness local water and fertile plains for sustained agricultural productivity.

Finally, climate variability, including risks of heavy rainfall and flash flooding tied to broader regional trends in extreme weather, highlights the need for resilient infrastructure and disaster management planning.

Execution Plan

1. GCC–Oman–EU Integrated Border Management and Cross-Border Cooperation Program

This program focuses on enhancing security, stability, and economic development along Oman's border with Yemen. By integrating national border agencies with GCC partners and EU technical expertise, the program standardizes procedures, improves intelligence sharing, and strengthens customs efficiency. Joint patrols, surveillance technologies, and interoperable communication systems enable coordinated security operations, while legal frameworks allow

information exchange and collaborative crisis response. Humanitarian support is a core component, providing health services, emergency response, and assistance for displaced populations. Economic initiatives include secure logistics corridors, infrastructure upgrades, and special economic zones to promote legal trade and local employment. Governance structures involve a steering committee of Oman, GCC, EU, and international agencies, supported by technical working groups. Risk mitigation strategies address security spillover, political sensitivities, human rights, and economic disparities, creating a safe and resilient border region.

2. Sustainable Tourism and Hospitality Cluster Development

This initiative manages seasonal tourism pressures, environmental degradation, and infrastructure strain in Dhofar. By developing sustainable tourism complexes with EU expertise, the project reduces visitor impact, diversifies the tourism calendar, and aligns infrastructure growth with ecological and cultural preservation.

3. Smart Infrastructure and Digital Services Network

This project addresses gaps in connectivity and uneven public services. Smart city technologies improve municipal management, enhance digital inclusion, and optimize transportation and utilities, directly supporting urban planning and accessibility in Salalah and surrounding areas.

4. Green Building and Sustainable Construction Education Initiative

This initiative tackles skills shortages, sustainable urban growth, and environmental pressures. Training professionals in energy-efficient and sustainable construction ensures Dhofar's rapid urbanization aligns with environmental conservation and climate adaptation.

5. Flood Management and Water-Food-Energy Nexus Project addresses climate risks, water scarcity, and agricultural resilience in both Dhofar and border areas near Yemen. By implementing early-warning systems, resilient infrastructure, sustainable irrigation, and renewable-powered water distribution, the project ensures climate adaptation, food security, and integrated water-energy management for vulnerable communities.

Together, these initiatives create a coordinated strategy that balances security, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social development. They integrate GCC, Omani, and EU expertise to transform Dhofar and the Oman–Yemen frontier into a model of resilient, inclusive, and sustainable regional development. This portfolio directly responds to local strategic challenges while advancing Oman Vision 2040 goals for infrastructure, energy, tourism, education, and cross-border cooperation.

Summary

By intervening in Khuzestan, Ras al-Khaimah, Jazan, and Dhofar in coordination with the GCC, the EU demonstrates its regional influence, strategic reach, and ability to shape security dynamics across the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. The purpose is to maintain momentum in the pursuit of shared EU GCC objectives, including strengthening political dialogue, enhancing trade and investment ties, promoting energy security and a green transition, addressing regional

and global security challenges, supporting people-to-people contacts, fostering economic diversification and innovation, and advancing humanitarian and multilateral cooperation.

28. Trade Trends

Since 2000, trade among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has grown in absolute terms but remains a modest share of total GCC trade, reflecting limited diversification beyond oil exports. In 2024, intra-GCC merchandise trade reached approximately $146 billion, representing only a low single-digit percentage of the region's total merchandise trade and about 3.2 percent of world trade. Trade between Iran and the GCC exists but is shaped by politics and sanctions. Iran's exports to the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf markets have historically been significant, with the UAE often serving as Iran's largest GCC partner. Iraq has emerged as a notable export market for the GCC, with exports to Iraq rising sharply and positioning Iraq among the top five partners in 2024. Direct Iran–Iraq trade has historically been strong, growing from around $1.6 billion in the mid-2000s to much larger figures by the 2010s, with Iran supplying manufactured and energy-related goods to Iraq. Broader Middle East intra-regional trade, including GCC, Iran, and Iraq, has historically been low compared to other regions, accounting for roughly 7 percent of total merchandise trade, far below the levels seen in the European Union and even in the Red Sea, where intra-regional trade has been steadily growing amidst competition over ports, naval bases and infrastructure, an ocean in the making into which Iran has often also inserted itself in part due to the situation in the Persian Gulf.

Figure Intra regional trade remains flat curved in this habitat
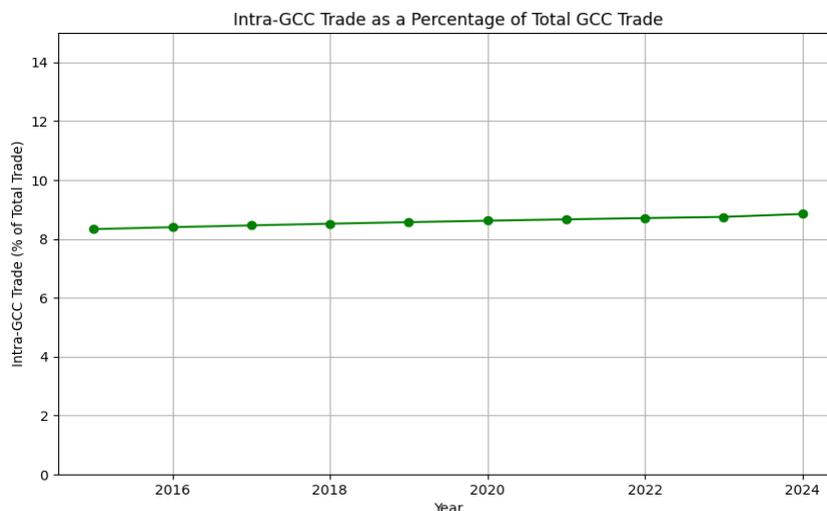
Intra-GCC trade reached about $146 billion in 2024, marking the highest on record. However, this is only around 10 % of total GCC trade, which exceeds $1.6 trillion in merchandise exchanges with the rest of the world. Most trade is with external partners such as China, India, and the US, leaving intra-regional commerce comparatively small. Smaller economies like Oman and Bahrain rely more on intra-GCC trade, while larger economies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE focus on global markets. Compared with other regional blocs such as the EU or ASEAN, where internal trade can exceed 60 % of total trade, the GCC's intra-regional trade is strikingly flat. The flatness reflects structural factors: specialization in oil exports, reliance on external supply chains, and limited diversification within the Gulf. Despite modest growth in absolute terms, the intra-GCC trade share has remained relatively stagnant over the past decade. This low internal trade share limits regional economic integration and reduces the resilience of Gulf economies to external shocks. Enhancing intra-regional trade remains a policy priority for the GCC to strengthen economic ties, improve diversification, and foster a more cohesive regional market. The flat profile indicates that, while intra-GCC trade exists, it plays a minor role in the overall economic landscape of the Gulf.

The GCC remains the most integrated sub-group economically in the Gulf, but the addition of Iran and Iraq does not constitute a formal economic bloc, as Iran is not a GCC member and Iraq has not joined. GCC–Iran trade relations are influenced by geopolitical tensions and sanctions, with occasional revivals through joint economic commissions and bilateral trade discussions. Iraq continues to strengthen its economic ties with the Gulf through growing imports from GCC countries, while Iran maintains significant trade with the GCC despite constraints, demonstrating that regional integration is partial and shaped by structural and political factors.

Intra-GCC trade has historically been a small share of the region's total trade, reflecting limited regional integration. Around 2000, intra-GCC trade accounted for roughly 6–7% of total GCC trade. By the mid-2000s, it had increased slightly but remained below 10%. Growth in intra-regional trade was modest compared with rapid expansion in GCC trade with external partners. By 2020–2023, intra-GCC trade stabilized at about 9–10% of total trade. Meanwhile, cross-Gulf and international trade expanded sharply, with total GCC trade rising from under $350 billion in 2000 to around $1.5 trillion by 2023. Trade with major partners such as China and India has grown significantly, reflecting Asia's rising importance in Gulf exports and imports. Energy exports remain the backbone of GCC trade, dominating both intra-regional and cross-Gulf flows.

Iraq's accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has never formally advanced beyond political and diplomatic discussion, and there are no official, codified conditions for membership on the table from the GCC itself, because accession for a non-member state would require the consensus of all current members and likely an amendment of the GCC Charter. As things stand, Iraq is not a GCC member, and accession is not under active negotiation in formal institutional terms. Instead, what exists is a gradual development of practical cooperation, shaped by political priorities and bilateral relations rather than formal GCC entry conditions. Historically, the GCC hesitated to treat Iraq as a prospective member in the years after the 2003 invasion and the rise of sectarian politics, partly due to mistrust rooted in Iraq's internal instability and concerns about Iranian influence.

Iraqi political fragmentation and the dominance of Shiite political forces were viewed with suspicion by some GCC states, especially amid concerns that Baghdad's alignment might not align with Gulf strategic priorities.

In the decades following the 1991 Gulf War, when Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, formal diplomatic ties were suspended and relations were deeply strained. Although ties have since been restored, historical suspicions continue to shape political willingness regarding deeper institutional integration.

GCC leaders have emphasized the importance of a stable, sovereign, and unified Iraq as a basis for closer cooperation, reflecting concerns that institutional integration should not burden the GCC's own frameworks or security interests, while supporting Iraq's territorial integrity and political stability. High-level cooperation has been pursued through practical integration projects, such as the Gulf–Iraq electricity interconnection project, which links Iraq's electrical grid to the GCC grid and enhances energy security and economic integration. Memoranda of Understanding and strategic cooperation frameworks signed in recent years establish mechanisms for regular political dialogue and identification of mutual interests, rather than formal institutional membership. Baghdad has actively sought to attract Gulf investment and strengthen economic ties in trade, industry, energy, and private sector cooperation, emphasizing the benefits of deepening economic relations.
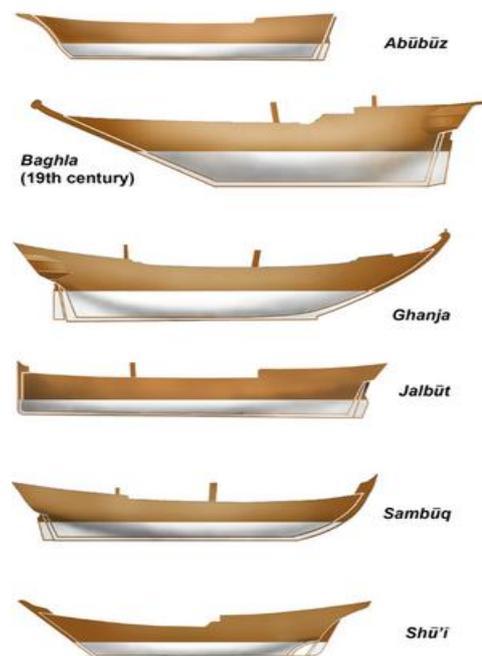

GCC states have expressed support for Iraq in its fight against terrorism, underscoring that improved security in Iraq contributes to stability across the Gulf, but these arrangements remain partnership dynamics rather than accession conditions.

A major implicit barrier to membership is institutional preparedness, as Iraq's political and economic system is not yet aligned with the GCC's governance frameworks and economic integration mechanisms, and there is no precedent in Gulf history of a non-monarchical republic joining the GCC.

Relations are developing through functional cooperation in energy, trade, infrastructure, and diplomacy, potentially laying the groundwork for deeper integration. Any formal movement toward GCC membership would require a clear political mandate from all six GCC states and from Iraq itself, in addition to adjustments in legal and institutional criteria, none of which have officially been set or agreed. In summary, Iraq and the GCC do not currently have formal accession terms because Iraq's membership in the GCC has not been institutionally pursued. Instead, they nurture a partnership relationship rooted in cooperation agreements, infrastructure projects like the electricity grid link, expanding trade and investment, and political dialogue aimed at stabilizing the region and reinforcing mutual interests. Progress in these areas may

deepen ties over time, but formal institutional membership remains a long-term hypothetical rather than an immediate agenda item.
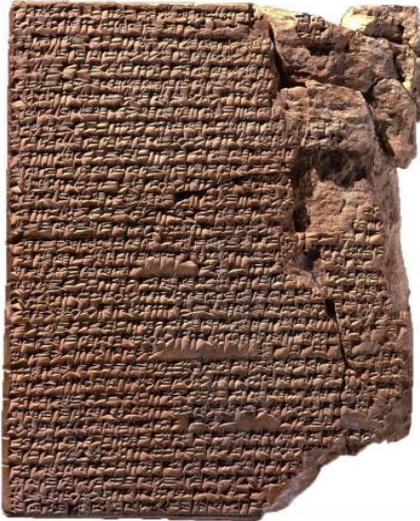
Moreover, going back to deep history, Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) has consistently functioned as a frontier zone between powerful civilizations. In the Akkadian and Elamite period (around the 24th–22nd century BCE), Mesopotamia lay between the Akkadian Empire and Elam in modern Iran, acting as both a contested border and a conduit for trade and cultural exchange. During the Neo-Sumerian and Old Babylonian periods, southern Mesopotamia was more consolidated, but northern Mesopotamia remained a frontier with Elam and later Assyria, continuing its role as a buffer region between competing powers. In the Persian and Median expansions around the 6th century BCE, Mesopotamia became a contested corridor, with Babylon and surrounding lands functioning as a buffer between emerging Iranian powers and the city-states of Mesopotamia. Under the Roman–Parthian and later Roman–Sasanid conflicts (1st century BCE – 6th century CE), Mesopotamia was the classic buffer zone between Rome/Byzantium and the Parthian/Sasanid empires, with cities like Nisibis, Hatra, and Ctesiphon serving as key fortified frontier towns.

The Byzantine–Sasanid period reinforced Iraq's strategic frontier role, with the Sasanid capital at Ctesiphon controlling Mesopotamia and acting both as a shield against Byzantine incursions and a bridge for trade, diplomacy, and religious exchange. Throughout these eras, Iraq's buffer role was dynamic, absorbing invasions, facilitating exchanges, and allowing larger empires to project influence without directly confronting one another's cores. Geography reinforced this function, as the Tigris and Euphrates plains, marshes, and deserts created natural defensive zones that made the region ideal as both a contested buffer and a fertile economic corridor. Iraq was rarely neutral, with cities, rulers, and tribes negotiating loyalties, paying tribute, or shifting alliances to survive between competing empires. This ancient pattern of buffer and corridor persisted into later Islamic, Mongol, and Ottoman periods, showing continuity in the strategic logic of the region, where Iraq has historically been both gateway and shield.

Iraq is not currently a geopolitical buffer between the EU and Iran as it used to be. Turkey has not acceded to the EU, so the premise of Iraq bordering the EU is hypothetical. If Turkey joined the EU, Iraq would physically lie adjacent to the EU via the Iraq–Turkey border. Iraq maintains strong historical, economic, and security ties with Iran. These ties mean Iraq is influenced by Iran and not a neutral zone. Iraq is pursuing economic integration with the EU and Gulf states through trade and infrastructure projects. Initiatives like the Iraq–Europe Development Road aim to connect Iraq to EU markets. Iraq's role is better described as a site of overlapping regional influence rather than a containment buffer. Iran's political and economic presence in Iraq complicates any simple buffer function. Overall, Iraq may become a zone of EU Middle East economic convergence, but it is not a formal geopolitical buffer between the EU and Iran, yet again.

Yes, Iraq's economic dependence on the Persian Gulf is significant for its trade with major Asian markets such as India and China. The country's oil exports, which constitute the bulk of its foreign revenue, primarily flow through ports like Umm Qasr, Iraq's main deep-water port on the Gulf. These maritime routes allow Iraq to reach global markets efficiently, since overland alternatives through Turkey or Iran are more limited and politically complicated.

For imports, Iraq relies on Gulf shipping lanes for goods from India, China, and other Asian economies, including machinery, electronics, and consumer products. This dependence gives Iraq a strategic incentive to maintain open and secure Gulf access, as any disruption—through conflict, sanctions, or regional tensions—directly affects its economy and fiscal stability. At the same time, this reliance creates geopolitical leverage for Gulf states and global powers, since control over shipping and port infrastructure can influence Iraq's trade flows.

The Gulf connection also shapes Iraq's foreign policy choices: it must balance relations with Iran, which borders it to the east, with those of Gulf states, Turkey, and Western powers, to ensure continued maritime access. In this sense, Iraq is both dependent on and embedded within a broader regional trade and security system, where the Persian Gulf is the lifeline linking it to Asia's major markets.

If Turkey joins the European Union, its eastern border with Iran would become part of the EU's external frontier. This border has a history of conflict, with 15 skirmishes reflecting the legacy of the Ottoman–Safavid rivalry. As an EU perimeter, it would expose the Union to direct security challenges along a historically unstable frontier. The EU would inherit responsibilities for customs, migration control, and border monitoring in this region. Iraq and the Caucasus would effectively become part of Europe's extended neighborhood. The EU would need to strengthen its Neighborhood Policy to address economic, political, and security issues there. Cross-border conflicts and smuggling could increase pressure on EU resources and regional diplomacy. The border region is also a potential route for refugees, requiring enhanced humanitarian and migration management. Historical rivalries show these borders are zones of cultural, ethnic, and political tension, not just geographic lines. Overall, Turkey's accession would shift the EU's focus eastward, making it more engaged in Middle Eastern and Caucasus affairs.

In order to avoid pitting competing political "empires" in the shared geography against each other, the EU and Iran will need to pay careful attention to several factors. The EU Neighborhood Policy (ENP) toolbox allows for flexible engagement, including economic incentives, technical assistance, and conflict-prevention measures . Stronger governance will ensure that the ENP-EaP framework achieves its goals of stability, development, and rule of law. Cultural diplomacy, such as educational exchanges, joint heritage projects, and people-to-people programs, can play a central role in building trust and reducing tensions. The Caucasus region can serve as a strategic bridge, linking the EU and Iran while fostering regional cooperation in trade, energy, and security.

Figure
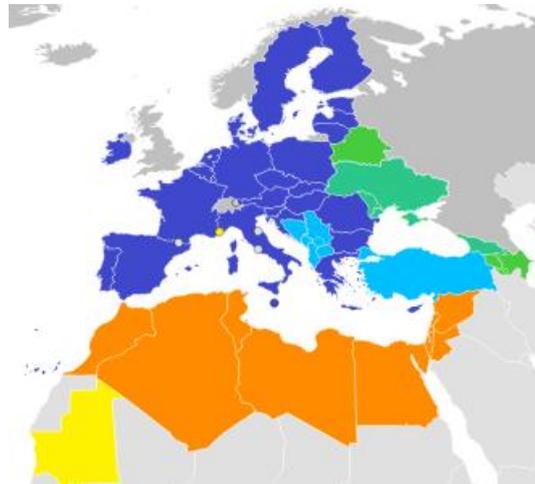
Any new EU–Iran contractual agreement would need clear rules on trade, security cooperation, and cross-border management, with mechanisms for dispute resolution and joint monitoring. Coordination on migration, infrastructure, and environmental projects will be essential to avoid triggering regional rivalries. Transparency and respect for local political dynamics will reduce perceptions of encroachment. Confidence-building measures, including regular dialogue and joint working groups, can strengthen trust. Aligning the agreement with broader EU and regional frameworks will ensure coherence and legitimacy. Ultimately, combining diplomatic, economic, and cultural tools can help balance influence while fostering regional stability and shared development.

At the end of the day, both the European Union and Iran have a common interest in a stable and prosperous Iraq for several reasons. A peaceful Iraq reduces the risk of spillover conflicts and regional insecurity that could draw in external powers or fuel proxy battles, which neither the EU nor Iran wants on its borders. The EU has invested in Iraq's recovery, governance reform, and socio-economic development because instability can drive migration pressures toward Europe and threaten European economic and security interests.

A stable Iraq also supports economic cooperation and trade ties, which the EU values as part of its Partnership and Cooperation framework with Baghdad. For Iran, Iraq's stability is vital for maintaining political and economic linkages, including trade and energy cooperation, and for preventing further disruptions that could destabilize its own neighbourhood. A prosperous Iraq can act as a buffer against extremist groups and limit the influence of external rivals, serving both EU and Iranian interests in a less volatile Middle East. The EU's continued support for Iraqi governance, reconstruction, and border management aligns with its priorities of regional stability and migration management. Iran similarly benefits from a stable Iraq that can engage constructively in the region rather than becoming a battleground for rival powers. Both actors also see value in Iraq's role as a potential bridge for regional dialogue and cooperation across the Gulf and Levant. Ultimately, a stable and prosperous Iraq helps reduce the strategic risks and humanitarian pressures that complicate both EU and Iranian foreign policy agendas.

Yemen

Yemen's accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a complex issue that depends on a mix of political, security, economic, and institutional conditions. Based on historical discussions, GCC frameworks, and regional dynamics, Yemen could theoretically accede under the following circumstances:

First, Yemen would need to demonstrate a stable and unified political system. Ongoing civil conflict, fragmented governance, and contested territorial control are major barriers. The GCC has emphasized that only a sovereign, functioning state capable of maintaining internal stability and representing its citizens could be considered for membership.

Second, Yemen would need to align its foreign and security policies with the GCC's strategic interests. This includes cooperation on regional security, maritime navigation, counterterrorism, and border management. Historical concerns over Iranian influence in Yemen, particularly in the context of the Houthi insurgency, would need to be addressed to reassure Gulf states.

Third, Yemen would have to strengthen institutional and administrative capacity to meet GCC governance standards. This involves modernizing public administration, establishing transparent economic policies, and adopting legal and regulatory frameworks compatible with those of existing GCC states.

Fourth, economic integration is essential. Yemen would need to participate in the GCC Common Market, harmonize tariffs and trade regulations, and facilitate cross-border investment and labor mobility. Given Yemen's current economic fragility, external financial support and gradual integration measures would likely be required.

Fifth, the consensus of all existing GCC members is mandatory. Unlike other regional organizations, the GCC requires unanimous approval for accession, meaning that any concerns from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or other members could block membership regardless of Yemen's internal reforms.

Finally, regional and international support could play a facilitating role. Mediation by GCC members, stabilization programs, and investment packages could help Yemen meet the criteria, but accession would still depend on the broader geopolitical climate and security assurances.

In short, Yemen's accession could occur only under conditions of internal stabilization, alignment with Gulf security and economic frameworks, institutional reform, and full political endorsement from all GCC member states. Without these, accession remains a long-term strategic goal rather than an imminent possibility.

Table

Dimension	Current Status	Required Condition for GCC Accession	Notes / Challenges
Political	Fragmented governance, civil war	Stable, unified government representing all citizens	Requires end to ongoing conflict, reconciliation among factions

Security	Ongoing conflict, Houthi insurgency	Alignment with GCC security policies, maritime and border cooperation, counterterrorism	Concerns over external influence (Iran) must be addressed
Economic	Fragile economy, low infrastructure	Integration into GCC Common Market, trade harmonization, investment facilitation	External support likely needed; gradual economic integration
Institutional	Weak state capacity, limited bureaucracy	Modernized public administration, compatible legal & regulatory frameworks	Capacity-building programs and governance reform essential

Key enablers for Yemen's potential accession include unanimous political support from all GCC member states, regional and international mediation including economic and development assistance, and gradual phased integration through observer status or partnership programs before full membership. Yemen's accession is contingent on achieving internal stabilization, alignment with GCC strategic priorities, institutional reform, and economic readiness, with unanimous consent from all current GCC members. Without progress across these dimensions, formal membership remains a long-term strategic aspiration rather than a near-term possibility.

29. COMPARISION OF REGIONS

Comparative regionalism is the study of regional integration and cooperation across different parts of the world. It goes beyond single-region studies to compare multiple regional arrangements. Regions are understood as both geographic and political constructs. The field seeks to explain why regions integrate differently. It examines how regional dynamics influence global politics. A major research topic is regional integration processes, such as trade agreements and political unions. Another focus is institutional design, including governance and decision-making mechanisms. Researchers study norms and regional identity, and how shared culture fosters cooperation. Regional security and conflict management are also central topics. Comparative regionalism evaluates the effectiveness of regional organizations, like the EU or ASEAN. It explores how global forces shape regional dynamics, including trade and international law. Key questions include why regional integration varies across regions. Researchers ask whether regional organizations achieve economic or political goals. The tension between sovereignty and regional obligations is a recurring issue. Another challenge is understanding the impact of globalization on regionalism. Comparative regionalism examines how norms and practices spread between regions. Practical applications include policy-making and designing trade blocs. It informs conflict resolution strategies and peacekeeping efforts. The field also aids diplomacy and global cooperation between regions and international organizations. Overall, comparative regionalism focuses on identifying patterns, assessing effectiveness, and understanding the interplay of institutions, norms, and global forces.

We can introduce a comparative regionalist lens to analyze the Persian Gulf by situating the GCC, Iran, and broader regional initiatives within patterns of regional integration worldwide. This approach helps identify how the Gulf fits into global typologies of regionalism and what

lessons other regions offer for dialogue, cooperation, and institutional design. Here's a structured framing:

From a comparative regionalist perspective, the Persian Gulf presents an intriguing case of intergovernmental regionalism with uneven integration, juxtaposed with a powerful non-member regional actor, Iran. Unlike deep integration models such as ASEAN or the EU, the GCC operates primarily on intergovernmental principles with limited supranational authority. Its coordination in economic (energy markets, partial customs union) and security domains (joint defense initiatives, political signaling) reflects a moderate, project-based approach typical of regions with high external strategic stakes and intra-regional diversity in resources and political priorities.

Comparative regionalism allows us to position the GCC+Iran dynamic alongside other regional frameworks. For instance, in ASEAN, phased integration and robust institutional mechanisms helped establish economic interdependence and normative alignment. The Persian Gulf, by contrast, exhibits high economic interdependence within the GCC, but political and security cooperation is more fragile and episodic, mirroring challenges seen in UMA or LAS, where political rivalries and historical disputes impede deeper institutionalization.

Furthermore, a comparative lens highlights the role of informal dialogue and confidence-building measures in regions where formal institutions are weak. Like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) or the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the GCC+1 process benefits from project-based and diplomatic platforms that can foster incremental cooperation while avoiding zero-sum framing. Comparative regionalism also emphasizes multi-level engagement, combining formal summits, technical committees, and track-two initiatives, a pattern seen in ASEAN and COMESA that could be adapted to Gulf diplomacy with Iran.

Finally, examining the Persian Gulf through comparative regionalism underscores the strategic importance of external mediators and geopolitical context. Whereas some regions rely heavily on internal convergence, the Gulf's security and economic environment—shaped by U.S., Chinese, and regional powers—requires balancing regional ownership with external facilitation, a lesson also drawn from Europe–Mediterranean partnerships or the Gulf's own historical engagement with international actors.

In short, a comparative regionalist perspective frames the Persian Gulf as a semi-institutionalized, intergovernmental region with potential for deeper cooperation through phased integration, confidence-building measures, and multi-track engagement. It also highlights the GCC+1 dialogue with Iran as a test case for how regions with asymmetric power, external pressures, and intra-regional divergences can nonetheless develop incremental, functional integration mechanisms.

Comparative Table of Regional Organizations

Organization	Institutional Strength	Level of Integration	Key Achievements	Challenges	Practical Lessons / Policy Applications
GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council	Strong secretariat; Supreme	High economic, moderate	Free trade area, GCC common	Political tensions among members;	Regional coordination works best when

	Council and Ministerial Council	security; limited political	market, joint military cooperation	limited supranational authority	member interests align; economic integration can precede political union; lessons for energy security and crisis response
UMA – Arab Maghreb Union	Weak, mostly consultative	Very low; minimal implementation	Some trade agreements	Political disputes (Western Sahara), low cooperation	Political conflict undermines integration; economic planning must account for territorial and political disputes; shows limits of top-down approaches
LAS – League of Arab States	Moderate; Secretariat and Arab League Council	Low to moderate; mainly political coordination	Mediation in conflicts, Arab summits, peacekeeping efforts	Limited enforcement power; intra-Arab conflicts	Consensus-based diplomacy is key; institutional presence matters more than binding authority; lessons for regional conflict resolution
UfM – Union for the Mediterranean	Moderate; co-presidency EU + Mediterranean partners	Low; project-based cooperation	Projects in infrastructure, energy, environment, civil society	Geopolitical conflicts; uneven participation	Project-based approaches work with diverse members; policy focus on concrete cooperation (energy, environment) rather than ambitious political integration
CACO – Central Asian Cooperation Organization	Weak; mainly consultative	Low	Some trade and energy agreements	Political differences; overlapping organizations; limited capacity	Regional cooperation is easier with shared economic incentives; institutional weakness reduces effectiveness; coordination between overlapping organizations is crucial
ASEAN – Association of	Strong Secretariat; ministerial	Moderate to high; ASEAN Economic	Free trade, regional stability,	Political differences; human rights	Consensus and non-interference allow stability;

Southeast Asian Nations	councils; ASEAN Summit	Community (AEC)	dispute resolution	criticisms; non-interference limits	economic integration can succeed with diverse political systems; soft norms strengthen long-term cohesion
BSEC – Black Sea Economic Cooperation	Moderate; Council of Ministers; Permanent International Secretariat	Low to moderate; mainly economic projects	Trade, transport, energy cooperation	Political conflicts; lack of binding authority	Economic projects are feasible even with political tension; regional diplomacy improves when institutional frameworks exist; focus on achievable goals
CSO – Caspian Sea Organisation	Weak; ad hoc meetings	Low	Caspian legal status agreements, pipelines	Territorial disputes; differing national interests	Energy cooperation is a key driver; informal structures can achieve agreements; political conflicts limit deeper integration
COMESA – Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	Moderate; Secretariat in Zambia, Court of Justice	Moderate; free trade area, customs union	Trade liberalization, regional infrastructure	Diverse economic capacities; political instability; slow implementation	Economic integration requires gradual, stepwise approaches; institutions support dispute settlement and infrastructure coordination

Analytical Takeaways:

1. Institutional Strength Matters: Strong secretariats and councils (ASEAN, GCC) correlate with better implementation of agreements.
2. Integration Levels Vary: Economic integration is easier than political integration; UMA and CSO struggle politically.
3. Conflict and Politics Are Key Challenges: Political disputes (UMA, CSO) limit regional effectiveness.
4. Policy Applications: Comparative study helps governments adopt best practices, design trade blocs, manage conflicts, and enhance diplomacy.
5. Practical Lessons: Start with economic projects, ensure consensus, account for political realities, and use institutions for coordination.

In terms of integration depth, ASEAN demonstrates the most advanced level, combining both economic integration and the development of a normative regional community. The GCC and COMESA exhibit moderate, project-based integration, with the GCC focusing on economic and political coordination and COMESA primarily on economic cooperation. UMA, LAS, and the UfM show weak or largely symbolic integration, with limited tangible outcomes.

Regarding institutionalization, ASEAN benefits from well-structured institutions and binding economic commitments that provide a framework for consistent regional governance. The GCC maintains councils and coordination mechanisms but remains largely intergovernmental, limiting its supranational authority. UMA and LAS function mostly as advisory bodies, while the UfM operates as a project-based platform without strong institutional enforcement.

When comparing economic and political/security focus, COMESA, ASEAN, the GCC (especially in energy and trade), and BSEC are more economically oriented, prioritizing trade liberalization and market coordination. LAS, the GCC (in its security dimension), and CACO before its integration into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization emphasize political and security coordination. The UfM and BSEC are largely project- or platform-oriented, facilitating cooperation without deep integration.

In terms of effectiveness, ASEAN stands out for achieving tangible integration outcomes, including trade liberalization and normative alignment among member states. The GCC has managed limited economic coordination but is more notable for high political signaling. UMA remains essentially stalled due to persistent political tensions among its members. COMESA has realized some progress in trade liberalization, although institutional capacity constraints limit deeper integration. LAS wields symbolic political influence but lacks strong enforcement mechanisms, limiting the impact of its resolutions.

Lessons Learned

omparative regionalism offers a valuable framework for understanding the implications and lessons learned from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), its early formation phase (GCC-1), and its relations with the European Union (EU). Examining these three dimensions provides insights into how regional integration, institutional design, and external partnerships shape policy outcomes and governance strategies.

The GCC demonstrates that regional economic integration can progress faster than political integration, illustrating that trade, energy cooperation, and labor mobility can foster cohesion even without a fully realized political union. Strong institutional frameworks, such as the Supreme Council and Ministerial Councils, facilitate coordination across member states but remain limited in their ability to enforce decisions, underscoring the constraints of supranational authority in the Gulf context. Security cooperation through mechanisms like joint military exercises and the Peninsula Shield Force shows that shared threats provide strong incentives for collaboration, even amid political disputes. The GCC experience underscores that economic interdependence is a powerful driver for regional cooperation, while consensus-based decision-making ensures stability but can slow the implementation of binding policies. Institutional design must carefully balance sovereignty concerns with integration ambitions,

and regional organizations are most effective when there is political alignment or shared security interests among members.

The early phase of the GCC, often referred to as GCC-1 (1981–1990s), focused on establishing the institutional foundations necessary for economic and security cooperation. Initial successes in trade agreements and labor mobility highlighted the critical importance of formal mechanisms to coordinate member states. However, geopolitical challenges, including the Iran-Iraq War and broader Gulf tensions, demonstrated that conflicts could significantly hinder integration, even in the presence of institutional structures. The experience of GCC-1 suggests that integration is best initiated with manageable economic objectives prior to pursuing ambitious political union. Institutions during this formative period required clearly defined mandates to respond effectively to crises, and early successes were essential in building political trust, which is critical for sustaining long-term regional cooperation. External security threats, while sometimes catalyzing integration, could simultaneously strain intra-regional trust and cohesion.

EU–GCC relations provide a comparative lens for evaluating external partnerships and cross-regional learning. These relations demonstrate how regional organizations interact in economic, political, and security dimensions. Cooperation between the EU and GCC has been particularly strong in areas such as energy trade, investment, and regulatory dialogue, yet weaker in political or human rights domains, reflecting divergent institutional cultures and norms. The EU experience illustrates that supranational institutions and legal frameworks can accelerate integration, offering benchmarks that GCC policymakers may study and adapt. Lessons from EU–GCC interactions highlight the value of cross-regional learning, the importance of aligning on shared goals such as trade or energy security while respecting regional norms like sovereignty and non-interference, and the utility of incremental integration strategies that leverage external partnerships to strengthen internal institutional capacity. Diplomatic engagement with established regional organizations such as the EU also enhances the GCC's international influence and bargaining power, demonstrating the strategic utility of inter-regional cooperation.

Across all three areas, several overarching insights emerge. Economic integration can precede political union, but institutional capacity must evolve to manage more complex governance challenges. Shared security concerns act as strong motivators for cooperation, although internal disputes may limit organizational effectiveness. Early institutional design, with clearly defined mandates and mechanisms for coordination, is essential for sustaining integration over time. Engagement with external partners provides lessons in supranational governance, regulatory harmonization, and trade facilitation. Ultimately, comparative regionalism emphasizes that context-specific strategies are essential: practices and models effective in one regional setting, such as the EU, require adaptation to the political, cultural, and economic realities of another, such as the Gulf region.

Key lessons learned from the ongoing GCC + Iran dialogue experience can inform the design of a more effective GCC+1 (Gulf Cooperation Council plus Iran) dialogue format going forward, especially in light of recent diplomatic shifts such as the restoration of Saudi Iran ties in 2023 and ongoing ministerial engagement.

Building groundwork before high-level talks is essential. Early phases of dialogue should focus on establishing principles and mutual expectations before addressing contentious political or security issues. Previous correspondence between the GCC and Iran emphasized principles such as good neighbourliness, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution, helping to create common ground when formal negotiations began. A GCC+1 process should therefore agree early on a shared procedural code and clear negotiation principles that all parties endorse before substantive topics are discussed.

Dialogue works best when trust is built progressively through confidence-building measures rather than jumping immediately into contentious issues. The restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023 was preceded by multiple rounds of engagement and careful groundwork facilitated by intermediaries. GCC+1 should adopt a phased architecture with verifiable steps in areas such as trade, connectivity, or cultural exchange before moving to security or political disputes.

Engagement that brings in broad participation and avoids narrow bilateral bargaining helps to legitimize outcomes. Arab-Iranian dialogue conferences have convened foreign ministers, scholars, and experts from multiple states and sectors to explore common interests and obstacles to cooperation, reinforcing ownership of the process. GCC+1 should incorporate both official state representatives and expert working groups across thematic areas such as economy, energy, environment, and security to deepen mutual understanding and broaden political commitment.

Presenting relations as adversarial or zero-sum undermines durable engagement. Regional actors have noted that a lack of dialogue historically contributed to crisis escalation, including conflicts where external actors intervened. GCC+1 should be framed not as a contest of influence but as a shared stability initiative that seeks mutual benefit, focusing on joint risks and opportunities.

Sustained dialogue requires more than sporadic summits; it needs institutional mechanisms and regular working-level engagement. Scholars have emphasized that long-term interaction requires dedicated structures, not just high-level statements. Establishing ongoing GCC+1 technical committees, secretariat support, and monitoring and reporting mechanisms can help sustain momentum between leaders' meetings.

Progress in economic and social cooperation can undercut incentives for conflict. Analysts argue that GCC states increasingly see economic integration with neighbors, including Iran, as a key to long-term security and prosperity and as an alternative to confrontation. Incorporating economic and infrastructure collaboration alongside political and security talks, such as joint energy, transport, and investment projects, can help weave positive interdependence into relations.

External mediation helped restart Saudi-Iran ties in 2023, but overt reliance on outside powers can skew incentives. While the China-mediated dialogue enabled restoration of ties, Gulf actors also emphasize the importance of direct engagement and regional ownership moving forward. External support should therefore be used sparingly and strategically, ensuring GCC+1 remains regionally led and regionally owned.

Dialogue processes can stumble, but maintaining communication channels is valuable even when tensions spike. Even after incidents such as missile attacks affecting Gulf territories, the broader dialogue framework helped prevent escalation by keeping communication alive. GCC+1 should include contingency protocols for dialogue continuity during crises, such as pre-agreed communication hotlines or crisis consultation mechanisms.

It is safe to assume that security trumps economy on cross-Gulfi dialogue and that the GCC+1 format will enjoy institutional support provided security and economy are perceived to reinforce each other by the Head of State in the region.

Overall, effective GCC+1 dialogue should start with shared principles and procedural norms, structure discussions in phases with verifiable confidence-building steps, include diverse stakeholders and thematic tracks, and frame the process as a shared stability initiative rather than a rivalry. It should build institutional continuity rather than rely on episodic summits, pair security dialogue with socio-economic cooperation, use external partners strategically without ceding leadership, and design mechanisms to maintain dialogue resilience in times of tension.

30. Institutionalised Cooperation

In the Persian Gulf, mistrust has historically accumulated faster than institutionalized dialogue. Yet the structural pressures facing the region—water scarcity, maritime vulnerability, energy transition, and climate stress—make isolation increasingly costly. Open communication channels are not merely diplomatic niceties; they are strategic instruments that reduce miscalculation, enable technical cooperation, and gradually transform rivalry into managed interdependence.

The first imperative is to distinguish between domains of high political sensitivity and those of functional necessity. Confidence-building must begin where mutual benefits are visible, sovereignty concerns are manageable, and technical expertise can depoliticize exchanges. Sequencing matters. Not every policy domain is equally suited to serve as an entry point.

Figure King Abdullah University of Technology

The most promising starting point is environmental and water cooperation. Water scarcity is a shared structural constraint across Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Iran, and Iraq. Aquifer depletion, desalination dependency, and marine ecosystem degradation affect all littoral states. Technical dialogue on desalination efficiency, marine pollution monitoring, groundwater data exchange, and early warning systems for harmful algal blooms can be framed as non-zero-sum cooperation. Environmental working groups can operate at expert level, minimizing ideological contestation. Historically, water cooperation in other regions has preceded political normalization because it addresses tangible survival concerns without directly implicating military balance.

Closely following water should be climate adaptation and disaster response. Extreme heat, sea-level rise, and infrastructure vulnerability create shared exposure. A regional communication mechanism for early warning on storms, maritime hazards, and heatwaves would build operational trust. Joint tabletop exercises for disaster relief and humanitarian logistics would create habits of coordination among civil defense authorities. These domains are politically safer than defense cooperation but strategically meaningful. They build interoperability in ways that are publicly defensible and economically rational.

Third in sequencing should be maritime safety and commercial navigation. The Strait of Hormuz and adjacent sea lanes are critical to global energy and trade flows. Even limited confidence-building—such as incident-at-sea communication hotlines, standardized reporting procedures, or shared deconfliction protocols—would reduce escalation risks. Maritime domain awareness does not initially require intelligence-sharing on military assets; it can begin with shipping safety, environmental spill response, and search-and-rescue coordination. Given the role of companies such as DP World and national energy operators like Saudi Aramco, the economic incentive for stability in sea lanes is powerful . Communication here serves both security and commercial continuity.

Energy transition and grid interconnection should come next. As Gulf economies diversify and invest in renewables and hydrogen, technical harmonization on standards, cross-border electricity trade, and carbon accounting can foster deeper institutional links. Cooperation in renewable research—particularly through institutions such as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology or Qatar University—creates epistemic communities that transcend immediate geopolitical rivalries . Economic interdependence through energy diversification subtly reshapes the strategic calculus.

Only after these functional domains have generated sustained interaction should more sensitive security dialogues advance. Traditional defense transparency measures—such as notification of military exercises, structured dialogue on missile doctrines, or broader arms-control discussions—require a foundation of trust. Attempting to begin with hard security without prior cooperative experience risks reinforcing suspicion. Functional cooperation creates routines; routines create predictability; predictability lowers threat perception.

Institutionally, open communication channels could take several forms. A standing Gulf Technical Cooperation Forum could convene ministers of environment, water, energy, and transport on a rotating basis. Parallel expert-level working groups would maintain continuous contact, insulated from episodic political tensions. Track-two dialogues hosted by academic institutions would enable candid discussion of risk scenarios. Hotlines between maritime authorities and coast guards would reduce incident escalation. Transparency mechanisms—shared environmental data dashboards, joint communiqués after technical meetings, and public reporting—would reinforce credibility.

The strategic logic is cumulative. Trust in international politics rarely emerges from grand gestures; it grows through repeated, low-visibility interactions that generate mutual confidence in competence and intent. When states cooperate successfully on desalination efficiency or oil spill response, they demonstrate reliability. Reliability gradually reshapes threat perceptions more effectively than declaratory diplomacy.

Advocating open communication in the Persian Gulf is therefore not idealism but prudence. The region's interdependence—ecological, economic, and infrastructural—already binds its states together. The question is whether that interdependence remains unmanaged and crisis-prone, or whether it becomes institutionalized and predictable. Beginning with water, climate adaptation, and maritime safety offers the most politically viable pathway. Over time, these domains can serve as scaffolding for broader regional security dialogue, anchoring stability not only in deterrence, but in shared resilience.

Comparative Advantages, Specialisation Patterns, and Cooperative Added Value Fields in the Persian Gulf

State	Comparative Advantages	Sectoral Specialisation	Cooperative Fields (Added Value)
Iran	Iran possesses substantial hydrocarbon reserves, a diversified industrial base, and strategic control over the northern approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. Its demographic scale further reinforces its productive potential.	Iran's economy is characterised by petrochemical production, heavy industry, and manufacturing capacities. Its geopolitical position provides leverage in maritime chokepoint dynamics.	Iran contributes added value through participation in maritime de-escalation mechanisms, regional energy-market stabilisation, and the development of trans-regional transport corridors such as the International North–

			South Transport Corridor.
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	The UAE benefits from advanced port and logistics infrastructure, globally connected aviation hubs, and significant investment capacity. Its regulatory environment supports rapid diversification.	The UAE specialises in logistics, re-export trade, financial services, tourism, and high-value service sectors. It has consolidated itself as a regional and global commercial hub.	Cooperative added value arises in joint logistics integration, maritime domain awareness technologies, renewable-energy partnerships, and digital trade facilitation.
Oman	Oman's comparative advantage lies in its geostrategic ports located outside the Strait of Hormuz, its stable diplomatic posture, and its emerging resource sectors.	Oman specialises in trans-shipment services, maritime support industries, fisheries, and mineral extraction. Its ports at Duqm and Salalah serve as alternative regional gateways.	Oman enhances regional cooperation through alternative shipping routes, maritime safety initiatives, and blue-economy development projects.
Qatar	Qatar holds one of the world's largest natural gas reserves and commands significant sovereign wealth. It has cultivated influential soft-power instruments.	Qatar's specialisation is centred on the LNG value chain, global aviation connectivity, and international mediation roles.	Qatar adds value through energy-transition cooperation (particularly LNG and hydrogen), joint investment platforms, and crisis-diplomacy mechanisms.
Saudi Arabia (KSA)	Saudi Arabia's comparative advantages include its position as the largest Arab economy, the world's leading oil exporter, and its substantial investment resources through the Public Investment Fund.	Saudi Arabia specialises in large-scale energy production, petrochemicals, and mega-project development. It also maintains a unique role in religious tourism.	Cooperative added value is generated through regional energy coordination, joint industrial value-chain development, and burden-sharing in maritime security and infrastructure protection.

Analytical Summary

The comparative advantages of the five states derive from structural factors such as resource endowments, geography, demographic scale, and capital availability. Specialisation patterns reflect national development strategies, with energy dominant economies (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar) contrasted against logistics and services-oriented economies (UAE, Oman). Despite competitive dynamics in ports, aviation, and regional influence, the Gulf exhibits significant potential for cooperative value creation in maritime security, energy transition, logistics integration, and investment coordination.

Potential Cross Gulf and Intra Gulf Cooperation Schemes

1. Maritime Security

Several cooperative schemes could be developed to enhance maritime security across the Gulf. A joint Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) platform could integrate radar, AIS, satellite, and coastal surveillance data from Iran, the UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, thereby improving situational awareness in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, and the wider Arabian Sea. A coordinated patrol mechanism, modelled on existing multinational maritime task forces but adapted to regional sensitivities, could reduce duplication and improve incident response. A Gulf wide maritime incident reporting and de escalation hotline could serve as a confidence building measure, particularly between Iran and the GCC states. Harmonised standards for port security, search and rescue operations, and environmental protection could further institutionalise cooperation.

2. Energy Transition

The Gulf states could pursue joint schemes that accelerate the regional energy transition. A shared hydrogen development framework could align national hydrogen strategies, coordinate infrastructure investments, and facilitate cross border trade in green and blue hydrogen. A regional carbon capture, utilisation, and storage (CCUS) network could connect major industrial emitters in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran to shared geological storage sites. A Gulf renewable energy integration initiative could explore the feasibility of interconnecting national grids to balance solar and wind variability across the region. Collaborative research centres focusing on desalination efficiency, energy water nexus challenges, and advanced materials for renewable technologies would further strengthen regional innovation capacity.

3. Logistics Integration

Logistics integration offers substantial opportunities for cross Gulf cooperation. A harmonised customs and digital trade corridor could reduce transaction costs and accelerate the movement of goods between Gulf ports. A coordinated port specialisation strategy could reduce redundant investments by aligning the roles of major hubs such as Jebel Ali, Hamad, Duqm, Salalah, and Dammam. A multimodal transport initiative linking Gulf rail networks with Iranian and Omani maritime gateways could create alternative routes that bypass chokepoint vulnerabilities. A shared maritime training and certification academy could standardise professional qualifications and improve labour mobility in the logistics sector.

4. Investment Coordination

Investment coordination could be institutionalised through several mechanisms. A Gulf sovereign wealth co investment platform could pool capital from the Public Investment Fund, the Qatar Investment Authority, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, and other national funds to support large scale regional infrastructure and technology projects. A cross Gulf industrial value chain initiative could align petrochemical, metals, and manufacturing clusters to reduce duplication and increase competitiveness. A joint venture framework for strategic sectors such as shipbuilding, maritime services, and renewable energy equipment could leverage complementary capabilities across states. A regional investment risk insurance mechanism

could reduce political and commercial risk for cross border projects, particularly those involving Iran.

Figure

Cooperation Domain	Core Description	Key Instruments	Progressive Benchmarks 2028	Progressive Benchmarks 2033	Progressive Benchmarks 2038
Maritime Security	Development of shared maritime situational awareness, coordinated incident response, and harmonised port-security practices.	MDA data-fusion nodes; de-escalation hotlines; harmonised port-security protocols; joint SAR frameworks; shared environmental-monitoring systems.	Initial cross-Gulf maritime information-sharing mechanism operational; bilateral hotline functioning; three ports aligned with shared security standards.	Multi-state Gulf MDA Network covering Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Gulf; regular joint incident-response exercises; majority of ports aligned with shared standards.	Fully integrated Gulf Maritime Security Architecture; automated data-fusion across all states; unified port-security regime; institutionalised crisis-management mechanisms.
Energy Transition	Cooperation on hydrogen, CCUS, renewable-energy integration, and joint research.	Hydrogen certification frameworks; cross-border CCUS consortia; regional renewable-energy research centres; grid-interconnection studies; desalination-efficiency R&D platforms.	Shared hydrogen certification scheme agreed; first cross-border CCUS feasibility study launched; Gulf Energy Transition Research Forum established.	First cross-border hydrogen infrastructure operational; regional CCUS demonstration project functioning; joint research outputs and technology roadmaps published.	Regional hydrogen market with cross-border trade; CCUS network scaled to industrial level; partial grid interconnection enabling renewable balancing; Gulf research ecosystem globally competitive.
Logistics Integration	Harmonisation of customs procedures, port-specialisation coordination, multimodal connectivity, and digital trade corridors.	Unified digital customs interface; port-specialisation roadmap; multimodal transport integration studies; logistics data-exchange platforms; maritime training academies.	Unified digital customs interface between two states; port-specialisation roadmap published; multimodal rail-maritime integration studies completed.	Digital customs interface adopted by most Gulf states; port-specialisation measures implemented in three hubs; first multimodal corridor operational.	Fully harmonised customs regime; region-wide multimodal logistics grid; ports operating under coordinated specialisation; Gulf positioned as integrated global logistics system.

Investment Coordination	Alignment of sovereign-wealth strategies, cross-border industrial value chains, and shared risk-mitigation instruments.	Gulf Co-Investment Platform; cross-border industrial cluster frameworks; regional investment-risk insurance mechanisms; harmonised investment-regulation guidelines; joint venture templates.	Co-Investment Platform created; priority sectors for industrial value-chain development identified; investment-risk insurance concept established.	First co-investment projects executed; cross-border industrial clusters launched; investment-risk insurance mechanism operational.	Mature regional investment ecosystem; integrated industrial value chains across petrochemicals, metals, maritime services, and renewables; sovereign-wealth coordination institutionalised.

The indicators used across the four cooperation domains are grounded in standardised index based measurement frameworks commonly applied in regional integration studies, security sector reform assessments, and energy transition monitoring. Each KPI corresponds to a specific index or quantifiable metric designed to capture the degree of institutionalisation, interoperability, or functional performance.

In the field of maritime security, the Maritime Domain Awareness Integration Index is a composite measure that evaluates the interoperability of surveillance systems, including AIS, radar, satellite feeds, and coastal sensors. Its values range from 0 to 1, where 0 denotes complete fragmentation and 1 denotes full regional integration. The Port Security Harmonisation Ratio is expressed as a percentage of major ports that have adopted shared security protocols, while the Joint Incident Response Rate measures the proportion of maritime incidents addressed through coordinated action. Together, these indicators quantify the transition from bilateral coordination in 2028 to a fully integrated Gulf maritime security architecture by 2038.

In the energy transition domain, the Hydrogen Certification Alignment Score is an index measuring regulatory and technical convergence in hydrogen production, certification, and trade. It ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating deeper harmonisation. The Cross Border CCUS Capacity indicator quantifies the annual volume of carbon captured and stored through shared infrastructure, expressed in megatonnes of CO_2 per year. The Joint Research Output indicator captures the number of co authored scientific publications, patents, and demonstrator projects, linking research collaboration to measurable outputs. These indicators collectively trace the evolution from pilot scale cooperation in 2028 to a mature regional hydrogen and CCUS ecosystem by 2038.

In the logistics integration domain, the Customs Harmonisation Index measures the degree of procedural, regulatory, and digital alignment across customs systems on a 0–1 scale. The Digital Trade Corridor Coverage indicator expresses the share of regional trade flows processed through interoperable digital systems, while the Multimodal Connectivity Score evaluates the integration of rail, road, and maritime networks. These indicators capture the progression from partial digitalisation and limited interoperability in 2028 to a fully harmonised, region wide logistics grid by 2038.

Table

Cooperation Domain	Tested KPI (Internationally Validated)	Indicator Value 2028	Indicator Value 2038
Maritime Security	**Port State Control Compliance Rate** (IMO standard)	70% compliance	95–100% compliance
	Maritime Incident Reporting Completeness Ratio (IMO GISIS metric)	40% of incidents reported	90% of incidents reported
	Search-and-Rescue Response Time Index (IMO SAR benchmark, 0–1 scale)	0.55	0.85
Energy Transition	**Renewable Energy Share in TFEC** (IEA/UNFCCC metric)	8–12%	25–35%
	Carbon Intensity of GDP (UNFCCC standard, kg CO_2/USD)	0.32	0.18
	Cross-Border Clean-Energy Investment Volume (OECD/IEA methodology)	USD 3–5 bn/year	USD 25+ bn/year
Logistics Integration	**Customs Efficiency Score** (World Bank LPI sub-indicator)	2.6	3.4
	Time to Clear Goods Through Customs (WTO TFA metric)	52 hours	18 hours
	Port Throughput Efficiency Index (UNCTAD port-call data, 0–1 scale)	0.45	0.80
Investment Coordination	**FDI Regulatory Restrictiveness Index** (OECD, 0–1 scale; lower = more open)	0.32	0.18
	Sovereign Wealth Fund Transparency Score (SWFI benchmark, 0–10)	6.5	9.0
	Cross-Border Industrial Investment Volume (UNCTAD methodology)	USD 8–12 bn/year	USD

In the domain of investment coordination, the Sovereign Wealth Co Investment Volume measures the annual value of joint investments undertaken by Gulf sovereign wealth funds, expressed in USD. The Regulatory Convergence Score is a 0–1 index assessing alignment in investment rules, dispute resolution mechanisms, and ownership regimes. The Cross Border Industrial Project Count records the number of operational joint industrial ventures. These indicators collectively reflect the transition from initial coordination mechanisms in 2028 to a fully institutionalised regional investment ecosystem by 2038.

31. Informal Policy making and pluralism

Informal politics in the Persian Gulf refers to the system of power, influence, and decision-making that operates largely outside formal constitutions, legislatures, or codified legal frameworks. While the Gulf states maintain official governmental structures, a significant portion of political life is conducted through personal relationships, family networks, tribal affiliations, and elite bargaining, which often carry more weight than formal institutions. In these monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, the royal families occupy a central role in political decision-making. Leadership and authority frequently stem from senior family members whose influence is derived not just from formal office but also from personal stature, historical legitimacy, and control over key economic and security sectors. Decisions are often negotiated privately among members of the ruling family before being formalized through official channels, and in many cases, the most powerful figures are not those with titular government positions but those with the strongest personal or familial connections.

Tribal and clan affiliations continue to be a core element of political life, especially in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman. Tribal networks influence appointments to government and military positions, the allocation of resources, and the formation of political alliances. Leaders must carefully balance competing tribal interests to maintain social stability and legitimacy, often relying on informal consultation and negotiation rather than codified laws. In many ways, these tribal structures operate as a parallel political system, providing cohesion and a mechanism for conflict resolution within society, even when formal institutions are relatively weak.

Elite bargaining and patronage also play a pivotal role in Gulf governance. The distribution of state jobs, business licenses, and large contracts serves as a means to secure loyalty and reinforce the authority of ruling elites. Such systems allow governments to maintain political stability by rewarding supporters and incorporating influential figures into governance networks. These informal arrangements are often flexible and adaptive, enabling leaders to respond quickly to political challenges, economic changes, or social unrest. However, they can also entrench inequality, consolidate power within a narrow circle, and limit broader political participation.

Economic leverage is another critical instrument in the informal political system of the Gulf. With substantial oil revenues and sovereign wealth funds at their disposal, ruling families and senior elites wield considerable influence over both businesses and citizens. Access to these resources can determine political influence, with economic alignment with the ruling family serving as a pathway to informal advisory roles and decision-making power. Consequently,

political influence in the Gulf is frequently inseparable from economic authority, creating networks where wealth, loyalty, and governance are deeply intertwined.

Informal politics extends beyond domestic governance into the regional and international sphere, shaping foreign policy and inter-state relations. Gulf states often rely on personal diplomacy, inter-royal visits, and elite lobbying to exercise influence across the region. Strategic decisions regarding security, energy, cross-border infrastructure, or regional alliances are frequently made through private consultations rather than formal institutional mechanisms. These informal channels allow rulers to negotiate sensitive matters discreetly, avoiding public scrutiny and formal constraints.

Figure Omani sipping water

In recent years, social media and digital communication have introduced new dimensions to informal politics in the Gulf. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp serve as arenas for political discourse, activism, and informal influence, particularly among younger populations. These channels allow citizens and interest groups to express opinions, mobilize support, and indirectly shape policy, even though governments monitor and regulate them closely. As a result, informal politics in the Gulf is now a dynamic interplay of traditional networks and modern communication tools, reflecting a blend of historical structures and contemporary social change.

In essence, informal politics in the Persian Gulf operates as a complex web of family influence, tribal loyalty, elite bargaining, patronage, economic leverage, and personal diplomacy. It functions alongside formal government institutions, often superseding them in practice, and creates a political ecosystem in which personal relationships and networks can determine outcomes more decisively than official laws or procedures. Understanding Gulf politics requires recognizing these informal channels and the ways in which they shape governance, economic distribution, social stability, and regional influence, offering insight into how power is exercised in one of the world's most strategically significant regions.

In the Persian Gulf, informal politics is particularly salient in economic and investment policy. Allocation of state contracts, business licenses, and economic incentives often depends on patronage networks, family connections, and elite negotiation. There is potential for pluralism by formalizing advisory councils or public-private forums that integrate entrepreneurs, SMEs,

and civil society into decision-making. Informal networks can be leveraged to bring diverse business voices into consultation processes, creating transparent pathways for influence. Urban planning and infrastructure development are also shaped by informal politics, as major projects such as ports, airports, free zones, and industrial parks are often influenced by elite and tribal networks with stakes in land, labor, or local communities. There is an opportunity to engage local communities, tribal representatives, and informal stakeholders in participatory planning committees to ensure equitable resource distribution and more inclusive decision-making.

Education and workforce policy is another area where informal politics plays a role, as recruitment in educational institutions, scholarships, and vocational programs frequently depends on elite recommendations or tribal networks. Greater pluralism can be encouraged by using informal networks to identify diverse talent pools, involving educators and student representatives in policy dialogues, and developing mechanisms for broader consultation on curriculum reforms and workforce development initiatives. Healthcare and social services are often delivered through informal tribal or family mediation, which helps resolve disputes, allocate resources, and determine eligibility for aid. Expanding pluralism could involve establishing advisory boards that include tribal leaders, patient representatives, and civil society actors to co-design policies and ensure local needs are reflected in planning.

Environmental and water resource management is another domain influenced by informal politics. Water allocation, land use, and environmental regulations frequently involve negotiation with tribal or influential local actors. Pluralism can be promoted by expanding the role of community councils and informal networks in environmental governance and engaging local stakeholders in water conservation initiatives and coastal management, integrating traditional knowledge into formal policies. Cultural and heritage policy also reflects informal politics, as tribal councils, family elders, and elite patrons influence cultural preservation, funding for museums, and heritage events. Greater pluralism can be achieved by consulting multiple cultural and ethnic communities in heritage policy-making and encouraging the co-creation of cultural programs and festivals to reflect diverse societal perspectives.

In energy and resource policy, decisions on oil, gas, and renewable energy projects often involve elite negotiations and tribal agreements, particularly where local communities are affected. Pluralism can be enhanced by establishing stakeholder councils that include local community leaders, experts, and industry representatives to advise on sustainable resource management, using informal politics to bridge formal policymaking and local interests. Urban security and policing are shaped by informal networks as well, since tribal and family networks often mediate local conflicts and maintain social order in ways that formal institutions cannot. Participatory security councils where informal actors advise on local policing strategies, conflict resolution, and community safety programs could improve trust and legitimacy.

Foreign policy and regional diplomacy are influenced by informal channels such as inter-royal visits, elite diplomacy, and business lobbying. Greater pluralism could be promoted by including academic institutions, think tanks, and non-governmental actors in informal advisory roles to broaden the range of perspectives influencing foreign policy decisions. Technology and digital governance are also shaped by informal networks, which influence tech adoption, cybersecurity practices, and regulatory approaches through elite consultations. Pluralism in this area could be encouraged by leveraging informal channels to crowdsource input from startups,

tech communities, and youth organizations for regulatory frameworks, digital policy, and innovation strategies.

The key principle is that in all these domains, informal politics—through tribal networks, elite negotiations, family influence, and patronage—already shapes outcomes. By intentionally opening these informal channels to a wider set of stakeholders, Gulf states can incrementally promote pluralism, improve policy legitimacy, and ensure policies reflect broader societal needs while maintaining social cohesion.

32. Multi level policy-making in the GCC+1

The Persian Gulf faces overlapping strategic challenges that demand a multilevel approach linking informal dialogue, formal cooperation, and durable institutional outcomes. Security fragmentation remains the core constraint, with rival threat perceptions between Iran and several Arab Gulf states shaping defense postures and alliance patterns. Maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz is both a chokepoint vulnerability and a shared interest in freedom of navigation. Energy transition pressures are reshaping hydrocarbon-dependent economies while creating opportunities for cross-border grids and hydrogen corridors. Youth unemployment and demographic imbalances generate socio-economic pressures that spill across borders through migration and remittances. Water scarcity and climate stress intensify competition but also incentivize joint desalination and environmental monitoring systems.

Food security vulnerabilities revealed by global supply shocks encourage coordinated strategic reserves and logistics integration. Fragmented regulatory systems limit intra-Gulf trade and investment despite geographic proximity. Informal dialogue—track-two forums, business councils, academic exchanges—can reduce misperceptions and build sector-specific trust. These dialogues should be structured around practical cooperation in infrastructure, ports, customs harmonization, and digital trade facilitation.

Formal cooperation can then codify these understandings through memoranda on energy interconnectors, shared maritime surveillance, and labor mobility frameworks. Institutional outcomes require strengthening or networking existing regional bodies rather than creating overly ambitious new ones. A phased approach would begin with technical working groups on non-politicized issues such as environmental monitoring and disaster response. Success in low-politics sectors can gradually expand to sensitive areas like coordinated maritime deconfliction mechanisms. Cross-border infrastructure projects—electricity grids, rail links, and fiber-optic corridors—can physically embed interdependence. Labor and knowledge mobility agreements can address skill mismatches while reducing irregular migration flows. Energy cooperation should evolve from oil market coordination toward renewable integration and carbon management platforms. Water and environmental governance can serve as confidence-building domains given shared ecological vulnerability. External partners can support capacity-building but should avoid securitizing economic cooperation. Over time, the cumulative linkage between informal trust-building, formal agreements, and institutional consolidation can transform competitive coexistence into managed interdependence.

The Gulf states, despite their immense wealth and rapid modernization, exhibit moderate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, with the UAE setting the regional benchmark

and Oman following closely, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain lag behind in relative performance. Their notable strengths lie in high-quality education, advanced urban infrastructure, and near-universal access to essential services, yet persistent challenges—including gender inequality, water scarcity, unsustainable consumption, and climate vulnerability—threaten long-term resilience. Structural dependencies on hydrocarbons, coupled with lifestyle-related health pressures, underscore systemic risks that could undermine sustainable development if left unaddressed. To accelerate transformative progress, Gulf states must empower women across society and leadership, transition to circular and climate-resilient economies, modernize health systems, and implement robust data-driven SDG monitoring frameworks. Ultimately, a strategically coordinated, innovation-driven, and sustainability-focused approach across economic, social, and environmental domains is essential for the GCC to not only achieve but surpass the 2030 SDG ambitions, positioning the region as a global exemplar of integrated sustainable development.

Table

SDG Goal (Broad Focus)	Gulf (GCC) States	Islamic Republic of Iran	Why It's Propitious to Improve
SDG 5 — Gender Equality	Major challenge across all GCC countries (persistent red flags) (sdgtransformationcenter.org)	Iran also has low parliamentary representation for women (headline indicator) (dashboards.sdgindex.org)	Improvements here have strong knock-on effects on economic growth, education outcomes, and poverty reduction.
SDG 2 — Zero Hunger / Nutrition	Regionally weak (rising obesity, poor nutrition trends) (sdgtransformationcenter.org)	Undernourishment and related nutrition indicators prominently feature on Iran's scorecard (dashboards.sdgindex.org)	Addressable through public health, food systems, and agricultural policy reforms.
SDG 6 — Clean Water & Sanitation	GCC scores mostly low (pressure on scarce freshwater, infrastructure challenges) (Arab Sustainable Development Index)	Iran has moderate basics in sanitation access, but improvements remain tied to water stress	Investments in water reuse, efficiency, and policy reform deliver measurable gains quickly.
SDG 8 — Decent Work & Economic Growth	Challenges in diversification and financial inclusion (regional trend) (sdgtransformationcenter.org)	Iran's economy faces barriers due to sanctions and structural rigidities affecting work and investment (dashboards.sdgindex.org)	Boosting economic resilience, employment, and inclusive growth strengthens overall development trajectories.
SDG 12 — Responsible Consumption & Production	Major challenge in GCC due to fossil fuel production/subsidies and resource intensity (Arab Sustainable Development Index)	Iran's production patterns also face sustainability concerns (energy and pollution) (dashboards.sdgindex.org)	Modernizing consumption patterns and industry standards drives environmental outcomes and future competitiveness.

SDG 13 — Climate Action	GCC has red or orange scores on climate indicators and emissions intensity (Egypt)	Iran's CO_2 emissions from fossil fuels and cement contribute to its SDG 13 load (dashboards.sdgindex.org)	Climate mitigation/adaptation is a global policy priority with access to finance and technology cooperation.
SDG 16 — Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	Regional governance, institution strength, transparency variances are challenges (sdgtransformationcenter.org)	Iran's corruption/perception score is low, reflecting institutional trust concerns	Improving governance systems strengthens investment climate, rule of law, and social cohesion.

Rationale for Prioritizing Specific SDGs in the Gulf and Iran

Shared Structural Gaps and Policy Leverage

Empirical evidence indicates that certain Sustainable Development Goals—particularly Gender Equality (SDG 5), Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), and Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12)—exhibit persistent underperformance across both the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the Islamic Republic of Iran. These deficiencies represent common policy entry points, wherein targeted interventions are likely to generate high co-benefits across multiple development domains, thereby amplifying overall regional SDG performance.

Alignment with National Strategic Priorities

In the Gulf, ongoing initiatives in economic diversification, labor market reform, and renewable energy deployment align closely with SDGs 8, 12, and 13, facilitating the integration of SDG objectives into existing national development frameworks. In contrast, Iran's SDG outcomes are constrained by structural economic and governance limitations. Policy emphasis on decent work, transparency, and resource efficiency could establish a virtuous cycle that enhances both domestic stability and international economic engagement.

Feasibility Within Existing Data Regimes

Although data gaps remain, notably for SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) in the Arab region, other goals, including SDGs 2, 5, 6, 8, and 12, are adequately monitored through available indicators. This coverage renders them tractable targets for policy design, implementation, and longitudinal evaluation, thereby facilitating evidence-based prioritization.

Priority SDG Indicators for Targeted Intervention

Based on cross-regional analysis and SDG Index frameworks, the most promising domains for focused improvement include women's economic and political participation rates (SDG 5), nutrition-related metrics such as undernourishment and overweight/obesity prevalence (SDG 2), water stress indices and access to sanitation services (SDG 6), financial inclusion rates and youth employment metrics (SDG 8), energy efficiency and sustainable industrial emissions

(SDGs 12 and 13), and governance and transparency indicators, including corruption perception metrics (SDG 16).


Strategic Implications

Targeting these mutually relevant SDG clusters allows for the development of a high-impact, actionable policy agenda capable of improving both aggregate SDG Index scores and tangible socio-economic outcomes over a five- to ten-year horizon. Subsequent national-level strategies can refine interventions by focusing on sub-indicators most salient to local contexts. This cross-tab analytical approach thus identifies priority areas where improvement is both feasible and essential to advancing sustainable development in the Gulf and Iran.

Moving up the ranks

To increase its rank on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index, the Persian Gulf states need to implement a combination of structural reforms, policy innovations, and social initiatives that address environmental, economic, and social dimensions simultaneously. Here's a detailed approach:

Figure

Source: https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/chapters/
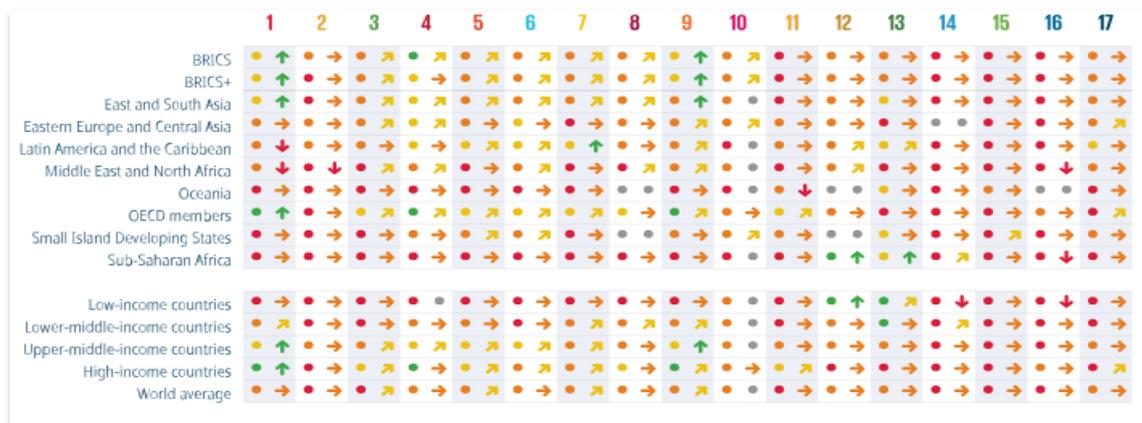
First, diversifying the economy away from heavy dependence on hydrocarbons is crucial. Countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar rely extensively on oil and gas revenues,

which creates vulnerability to market fluctuations and limits sustainable job creation. Expanding sectors such as renewable energy, technology, tourism, manufacturing, and knowledge-based industries can generate sustainable growth, reduce environmental pressures, and provide broader employment opportunities, directly supporting SDGs related to decent work, economic growth, and industry innovation (SDG 8 and 9).

Second, investing in renewable energy and environmental sustainability is essential. The Gulf states have some of the highest per capita energy consumption and carbon emissions in the world. Large-scale solar, wind, and green hydrogen projects, along with energy efficiency measures in buildings and industry, can reduce emissions, conserve water, and contribute to climate action goals (SDG 7 and 13). Strengthening regulations on air and water pollution and integrating circular economy principles into industrial planning would further improve environmental sustainability scores.

Third, enhancing water and food security is critical. With scarce freshwater resources, dependence on desalination, and extreme aridity, Gulf states face persistent water stress. Expanding investment in efficient desalination technologies powered by renewable energy, adopting sustainable agriculture practices, and improving food supply chains can strengthen resilience and support SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

Fourth, promoting inclusive education and skills development is key. While literacy and school enrollment are generally high, there is a need to align educational curricula with the skills demanded by diversified economies. Encouraging vocational training, digital literacy, and STEM education, alongside gender equality in access to education and employment, directly contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Fifth, strengthening governance, transparency, and institutional capacity can improve social trust, accountability, and effective policy delivery. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) is closely linked to anti-corruption measures, digital government services, and citizen participation. Encouraging civic engagement through formal and informal channels can help integrate diverse societal voices into policymaking.

Sixth, improving healthcare systems and social protection is important for long-term sustainability. Expanding preventive care, reducing lifestyle-related diseases, and strengthening access to healthcare services supports SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Social safety nets, labor protections, and equitable access to services for migrant and local populations enhance social cohesion and resilience.

Seventh, enhancing regional cooperation and integration can amplify progress on the SDGs. Shared initiatives in water management, energy grids, transportation infrastructure, and environmental conservation allow Gulf countries to benefit from economies of scale, knowledge transfer, and coordinated action, aligning with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Finally, data collection and monitoring systems must be strengthened. Accurate and timely data across all SDG indicators enable evidence-based policymaking, benchmarking, and international reporting, which are essential to improving SDG index rankings.

In summary, the Persian Gulf can improve its SDG performance by diversifying the economy, expanding renewable energy, ensuring water and food security, enhancing education and healthcare, promoting inclusive governance, strengthening social protection, fostering regional cooperation, and investing in robust data systems. These measures collectively address environmental, social, and economic dimensions, positioning the region for higher sustainability performance.

The Role and Impact of GCC Regulations on SDG Performance

GCC regulations play a critical role in shaping national and regional trajectories toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. By codifying standards across economic, social, and environmental domains, regulatory frameworks provide both direct and indirect mechanisms that influence SDG outcomes. For instance, regulations governing labor markets, financial inclusion, and women's workforce participation directly impact SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), while environmental and energy policies shape outcomes for SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

To improve Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) performance, the Persian Gulf states must implement a multifaceted strategy that combines structural reforms, policy innovations, regulatory harmonization, and inclusive governance. A key starting point is economic diversification, reducing dependence on hydrocarbons by expanding sectors such as renewable energy, technology, tourism, manufacturing, and knowledge-based industries. This transition supports SDGs related to decent work, economic growth, and industry innovation (SDG 8 and 9) while building resilience to external shocks.

Environmental sustainability is central to SDG advancement. Large-scale investments in solar, wind, and green hydrogen, alongside energy efficiency measures in industry and buildings, can reduce emissions and conserve resources, addressing SDG 7 and SDG 13. Sustainable water management and food security policies are crucial in arid Gulf environments. Innovative desalination powered by renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and improved food supply chains strengthen resilience and support SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

Education and skills development are critical enablers. Aligning curricula with labor market needs, promoting vocational training, digital literacy, and STEM education, and enhancing gender inclusivity contribute to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Strengthening healthcare and social protection systems addresses SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and ensures equitable access for both citizens and migrant populations, increasing social cohesion.

Informal politics—through tribal networks, elite negotiations, family influence, and patronage—already shapes policy across sectors such as economic investment, urban planning, social services, environmental management, and foreign policy. By intentionally broadening participation in these informal networks, Gulf states can foster greater pluralism, integrate local knowledge and community perspectives, and improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of

policy-making. This approach can complement formal institutions, creating flexible, adaptive channels that respond quickly to emerging challenges.

GCC regulations amplify these efforts by codifying standards across economic, social, and environmental domains. Policies governing labor markets, financial inclusion, and women's workforce participation directly influence SDG 5 and SDG 8, while environmental, energy, and water regulations impact SDG 6, SDG 12, and SDG 13. Harmonization of standards—such as energy efficiency protocols, water management, and corporate governance norms—reduces fragmentation, encourages best-practice diffusion, and strengthens measurable progress on SDG indicators. Clear incentives and penalties within regulatory frameworks stimulate private-sector engagement, innovation, and sustainable industrial practices.

The effectiveness of regulations depends on robust enforcement, monitoring, and alignment with national development strategies. Data-driven monitoring, cross-sector coordination, and adaptive regulatory mechanisms ensure that policies remain responsive to emerging economic, environmental, and social challenges. Combined with informal political networks, participatory mechanisms, and policy innovation, this approach allows Gulf states to incrementally improve SDG performance while maintaining social stability and cohesion.

Finally, regional cooperation through the GCC enhances all these dimensions. Shared initiatives in energy grids, water resource management, infrastructure, and environmental conservation allow member states to leverage collective expertise and economies of scale. By integrating diversification, sustainability, inclusive governance, informal political participation, and harmonized regulations, the Persian Gulf can progressively advance toward the 2030 Agenda, improving both national and regional SDG rankings and demonstrating a model of sustainable development in a high-impact, resource-rich region.

Summary

Strengthened SDG governance is another good case for examining decision-making processes in the Persian Gulf to understand the specific challenges of this sub-region compared with othe regions of the world. A more sustainable and inclusive Persian Gulf can help addresses challenges related economic diversification, the need for investment in renewable energy, underpin the enhance of food and water security, promote inclusive education and skills development. Accidentally these lapses also helps address preparations for the post oil age and greater youth involvement and female empowerment. To be effective and efficient this come with the strengthening of governance and more pluralist multi-level policy-making systems, something that falls within legitimate Islamicate political discourse that short of democracy also could lead to increased accountability and participatory governance. In comparison in Africa generally speaking, the improving SDG is oriented towards improving the provision of infrastructure, strengthen human capital, creating a more conducive business environment, strengthen the capacity of states and institutions and acting to size comparative advantages for job-seekers .

34. Contingengy Planning on Iran

According to Marc Lynch, four main scenarios could follow a major war involving Iran. The first is a managed containment outcome, where the regime survives but weakened, with its

military and nuclear capacity constrained (Lynch, 2026). The second is an orderly regime change, in which the current leadership falls and is replaced by a transitional government that stabilizes the country. Lynch treats this scenario as unlikely, given Iran's strong state institutions and history of resisting external pressure. The third scenario is state failure and civil conflict, where the regime collapses but no stable alternative emerges. In this case, Iran could fragment into competing factions, producing prolonged instability and regional spillover. The fourth scenario is the reconstitution of authoritarian rule, where hard-liners regain control and consolidate power after a period of turmoil. Lynch suggests that chaotic collapse or renewed authoritarianism are more plausible than a smooth democratic transition. Overall, he argues that military intervention does not guarantee a stable or desirable political outcome.

This section evaluates the potential strategic outcomes and post-conflict security requirements in three hypothetical scenarios involving U.S. military action against Iran: limited strikes to weaken capabilities, regime change, and obliteration of the governmental apparatus. Each scenario presents distinct risks, operational challenges, and post-conflict management imperatives. The analysis highlights the importance of comprehensive planning that integrates military, political, and humanitarian dimensions, as well as coordination with European partners and regional allies. Timely, detailed planning for stabilization, governance, and regional security is essential to mitigate escalation, prevent insurgency, and preserve global credibility.

Background

Iran's strategic doctrine emphasizes the principles of "no defeat and no conquest," relying on a dense network of proxies, asymmetric warfare capabilities, and missile forces to deter direct attacks and project influence across the Middle East. In contrast, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) anchors its national security strategy in formal defense partnerships, primarily with the United States, leveraging advanced arms procurement, structured military cooperation, and alliance-based deterrence to secure its regional position. This divergence creates a structural regional rivalry characterized by asymmetric competition, proxy conflicts, and strategic signaling rather than open conventional war.

Any U.S. military action against Iran would thus operate within a complex environment, requiring careful assessment of Iran's retaliatory capabilities, internal factional dynamics, and regional spillover effects. Post-conflict planning is crucial to prevent security vacuums, manage humanitarian crises, and stabilize political structures.

Scenario Analysis

Scenario 1: Limited Strikes to Weaken Iran

In this scenario, U.S. objectives would be to degrade Iran's nuclear and military capabilities without displacing the existing regime. While conventional strikes could achieve tactical success, the regime would remain intact, creating a persistent risk of asymmetric retaliation through proxy militias, cyber operations, and missile strikes. Infrastructure disruption, even if limited, may produce humanitarian needs requiring rapid response. Post-strike planning should focus on enhanced regional monitoring, missile defense support for allies, and targeted

humanitarian assistance. Deterrence communication must remain credible to prevent escalation while signaling clear limits to operational objectives.

Scenario 2: Regime Change

Regime change, achieved through internal uprisings or external intervention, carries high risk of power vacuums and factional fighting. Collapse of security institutions—including police, military, and intelligence services—could lead to widespread instability and insurgency. Effective post-change planning would require establishing a provisional government recognized domestically and internationally, restructuring security forces through Security Sector Reform (SSR), and implementing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs for militias and loyalist factions. Protection of critical infrastructure and maintenance of essential public services would be crucial to stabilize the country, while transitional justice measures and political reconciliation would be necessary to secure legitimacy.

Scenario 3: Obliteration of the Governmental Apparatus

Total destruction of Iran's governing structures would produce extreme instability, with immediate collapse of law, order, and essential services. The likelihood of insurgency, civil war, and regional destabilization—including refugee flows—would be high. Post-obliteration security architecture must include interim multinational security forces to establish basic order, provisional governance to coordinate reconstruction, and comprehensive SSR and DDR programs. Border control and regional coordination would be critical to manage cross-border threats. Restoration of critical infrastructure—including energy, water, healthcare, and transportation—would be urgent, alongside intelligence and situational monitoring systems to counter emerging extremist threats. Civil-military coordination and public communication would be essential to prevent chaos and build legitimacy.

Strategic Implications

The scale of military action directly dictates post-conflict management complexity. Limited strikes focus on deterrence and containment, regime change requires stabilization and institution-building, and total obliteration demands full-spectrum security, governance, and humanitarian operations. Each scenario carries escalating risks of asymmetric retaliation, insurgency, and regional spillover, emphasizing the need for early planning and coordination with European allies, Gulf partners, and international organizations. Policymakers must weigh operational gains against potential humanitarian crises, regional instability, and long-term strategic credibility.

Recommendations

1. Comprehensive Contingency Planning: Develop integrated operational and post-conflict plans for all three scenarios, including security, governance, and humanitarian components.
2. Allied Coordination: Engage EU partners and regional allies to share intelligence, coordinate defensive measures, and align stabilization strategies.

3. Provisional Governance Mechanisms: Prepare structures for interim administration in scenarios involving regime change or governmental collapse.
4. Security Sector Reform & DDR Programs: Design scalable SSR and DDR programs tailored to the scale of conflict to prevent proliferation of armed factions.
5. Critical Infrastructure Protection: Prioritize rapid assessment and rehabilitation of energy, water, healthcare, and transport systems.
6. Regional Stabilization Measures: Strengthen border monitoring, refugee management, and coordination with neighboring states to contain instability.
7. Strategic Communication: Develop clear messaging to domestic and regional populations to mitigate misinformation, reduce panic, and reinforce legitimacy.
8. Intelligence & Threat Monitoring: Maintain continuous situational awareness of asymmetric threats, extremist networks, and proxy activity.
9. Humanitarian Preparedness: Establish pre-positioned humanitarian aid and medical support to manage civilian impacts in all scenarios.
10. Continuous Risk Assessment: Regularly update scenario planning to reflect changes in Iranian capabilities, regional dynamics, and operational developments.

Summary

Any U.S. military engagement with Iran, regardless of scale, would generate complex post-conflict challenges that require early, integrated planning across military, strategic, and managerial dimensions. The divergence between Iran's asymmetric, proxy-based doctrine and Saudi Arabia's alliance-dependent posture amplifies regional risks. EU and U.S. planners must account for asymmetric retaliation, governance vacuums, and humanitarian needs in all scenarios. Early preparation of post-conflict security architecture, including provisional governance, SSR, DDR, and regional stabilization measures, is essential to prevent catastrophic instability and ensure long-term strategic objectives are achievable.

If undertaken for political ends to massage Iran into submission at the negotiation table, involving decapitation, nuclear installations and certain security institutions, indications are Ali Larijani, a former IRGC Commander will take over, leading to a power transition towards a less fanatically theocratic regime and perhaps even a military dictatorship as caretaker government, even if the basic orientation of long-term campaigning is unlikely to change overnight. Since the EU was unsuccessful in getting snap back sanctions through the UNSC, the question arises how to bring EU regional diplomacy back in play in coordination with the US. The Oman based government is certainly not one who fuses technical and political , diplomatic and economic levers seamlessly irrespective the Omani Foreign Minister Mr. Badri is also a well respected and wise diplomat.

The warnings from the region's secret services and diplomats , including Jerusalem, remains the same: Israel will size on the second bombing of Iran to reconquer the West Bank, something that could lead to another Nakba, a large inflow of refugees and endanger the stability and prosperity of Jordan and destroy the possibilities for comprehensive peace or delay it for generations to come.

Is President Trump acting irresponsibly?

Richard Haass in his op-ed in Financial Times on Trumps choice of war reminds us that wars differ not only in how they are fought but in why they begin, distinguishing sharply between wars of necessity and wars of choice. A war of choice carries a peculiar moral and strategic burden because leaders must justify costs that were not forced upon them by immediate survival. The argument implies that when a state voluntarily crosses the threshold into war, it also assumes responsibility for designing the path out. Military success alone cannot settle such conflicts because the political questions that produced the war inevitably return. Haass suggests that the very issues dismissed before the war—diplomacy, limits, concessions—become unavoidable when seeking peace. This reveals a paradox of power: the side capable of starting a war unilaterally cannot end it alone. War therefore becomes a cycle in which force postpones rather than resolves the underlying political bargaining. The call for "unconditional surrender" appears, in this light, less a strategy than a refusal to confront the realities of negotiated endings. Haass's deeper lesson is that wars terminate not when one side desires victory, but when all sides see negotiation as preferable to continued destruction. In that sense, the real challenge is not winning the war but rediscovering the political imagination that might have prevented it.

Many wise observers perceive that the conflict now unfolding with Iran threatens to extend far beyond the confines of a localized struggle between the United States, Israel, and that land, and may well draw into its vortex the entire region. For Iran, situated as it is at the crossroads of many nations and strife-torn provinces, touches upon multiple contested regions, and its actions resonate through lines of fault already deepened by past enmities. Already, missiles and drones have traversed borders, striking in the Gulf, upon Israel, and at the bases of the United States, and thus have drawn into the contest new actors, compelled by circumstance if not by choice. When the first attacks occurred, the leaders of Tehran did not confine themselves to defense alone, but extended their blows to neighboring territories and military installations, thereby heightening the incentives for those who felt endangered to act in turn. They signaled plainly that, should the United States commence war, it would not remain local, but would become regional, reflecting a doctrine designed to widen the theater of contest and to impose upon their opponents burdens that they might scarcely bear. Moreover, the militias and factions allied with Iran—Hezbollah, the forces of Iraq, the Houthis, and others—already move across the lands, and, perceiving weakness or opportunity, might open yet further fronts. The states of the Gulf—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar—already feel the threat upon their own soil, and should it persist, might join the struggle openly alongside the United States and Israel. Attacks upon commerce, upon the channels of trade, upon energy and port facilities, impose not merely military, but economic costs, compelling the rulers of the region to act for the defense of their realms and the preservation of their peoples. When civilians perish, when false reports circulate, and when events move with sudden and unforeseen speed, the danger grows that each side misreads the intentions of the other, and that the conflict, unchecked by wisdom, expands beyond expectation. Finally, before hostilities erupted, diplomacy yet offered hope; but with its abrupt collapse, the instruments of prudence weakened, and the logic of war prevailed, even as the actions of Iran threaten to draw the Gulf states nearer to the United States, forging new alliances against Tehran and shaping the fates of many nations.

An Exit strategy is necessary

An effective exit strategy in a military or political conflict combined military, political, economic, and diplomatic elements to ensure that ending the conflict created no vacuum and prevented renewed violence.

Key elements appeared as follows:

Clear objectives: Define what "success" looks like before the exit. This could be a negotiated settlement, regime change, territorial security, or stabilization. Without clear objectives, withdrawal can appear aimless and create chaos. In the name of which peace did the US and Israel go to war ?

Conditions-based timeline: Set milestones or conditions that trigger withdrawal rather than a fixed calendar. For example, reducing violence, securing key infrastructure, or achieving political reforms.

Negotiated settlements: Engage local actors, allies, and adversaries to reach agreements that can survive once external forces leave. This often includes ceasefires, power-sharing arrangements, or international guarantees.

Political reconciliation: Encourage governance, institutional reforms, and inclusion of different factions to reduce the risk of civil unrest or insurgency after departure.

Security handover: Train and equip local security forces to maintain order and defend gains. A poorly prepared local force risks a rapid collapse of stability.

Civilian protection and humanitarian planning: Ensure civilians are protected during and after withdrawal, including access to food, health services, and displaced persons support.

Economic stabilization: Support reconstruction, jobs, and basic services to prevent economic collapse from reigniting conflict.

Communication and messaging: Clearly articulate the rationale for exit to domestic, local, and international audiences to manage expectations and maintain credibility.

Contingency planning: Prepare for unexpected developments, including renewed fighting, extremist resurgence, or regional interference. Flexibility is key to responding to changing conditions.

Exit sequencing and coordination: Plan the phased withdrawal of troops, resources, and support systems to avoid leaving gaps that adversaries can exploit.

Applied to Iran

A strong exit strategy is not just about abandoning the domains through ceasure of fire under the war plan, but about leaving in a way that preserves stability, legitimacy, and long-term objectives. For this political leadership is necessary.

Clear objectives: The US, Israel, or coalition partners must define what a successful end looks like—whether it is reducing missile attacks on the region, smashing the navy and degrading the capability to enroll proxies in offensively and how this works towards halting Iranian nuclear development in order to provide the conditions for either unconditional surrender or making governing so difficult regime change appears the better alternative to disintegration of the state. Ambiguity risks prolonging fighting or expanding the war.

Conditions-based timeline: Withdrawal or de-escalation should depend on measurable outcomes, like reduced Iranian attacks, adherence to negotiated ceasefires, or the neutralization of proxy strikes in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Lebanon. A rigid calendar could leave a vacuum.

Negotiated settlements: It takes time to learn to cooperate and negotiations were interrupted for reasons outside the negotiators influence. War is the prolongation of politics, and all wars leas to negotiations on the terms of the peace. The conceptual infrastructure is there, and this means 40% of the work is already undertaken. Moneyyyyyy!

Political reconciliation: Encourage inclusive governance in Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen to prevent Iranian-backed militias from exploiting instability, reducing the likelihood that withdrawal will trigger local uprisings.

Security handover: Train and equip Gulf states' militaries and local security forces to defend critical infrastructure and borders after coalition forces withdraw. This includes rapid response to missile or drone attacks and countering terrorist threats.

Civilian protection and humanitarian planning: Ensure humanitarian corridors, reconstruction of bombed infrastructure, and protection for civilians in conflict zones to prevent mass displacement or a humanitarian crisis that could spark further conflict.

Economic stabilization: Maintain or restore oil and trade flows in the Strait of Hormuz and surrounding areas to prevent regional economies from collapsing, which could exacerbate tensions or push more actors into the conflict.

Communication and messaging: Clearly explain the exit strategy to domestic audiences, Gulf partners, and Tehran to reduce misperceptions, signal limits of military engagement, and prevent escalatory miscalculations.

Contingency planning: Prepare for Iranian retaliation through proxies, cyberattacks, or strikes on US allies, and have rapid-response plans to deter escalation without reigniting full-scale war.

Exit sequencing and coordination: Gradually reduce foreign military presence, withdraw logistical support, and coordinate with allies to ensure no gaps appear that Iran or its proxies could exploit, while keeping diplomatic channels open for de-escalation.

In short, an Iran-specific exit strategy would **tie military withdrawal to regional stability, diplomatic agreements, and local capacity-building**, rather than treating exit as simply a

troop reduction. It's about managing escalation, containing proxies, and ensuring that leaving doesn't **turn a local conflict into a wider regional war**.

35. Iran's Post –Sanctions Economy and the IRGC

Sanctions are designed to coerce behavioral change by restricting access to financial markets, trade networks, and technology flows. Yet the evolution of economies under prolonged sanctions demonstrates a complex and often counterintuitive reality. Rather than collapsing, sanctioned economies frequently adapt through institutional restructuring, shadow trade expansion, domestic substitution, and elite consolidation of strategic sectors.

This memorandum examines the evolution of post-sanctions economies in theory and practice, drawing on empirical patterns across multiple cases. It presents a focused case study of the economic empire associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), analyzing how sanctions have reshaped economic power structures in Iran. The memo concludes with policy recommendations for designing sanctions regimes that are effective while anticipating post-sanctions reintegration challenges.

How Economies Evolve Under Sanctions

Economic sanctions traditionally aim to restrict a state's access to capital, trade, and technology, creating macroeconomic pressure intended to alter political behavior. Classical economic theory suggests that sanctions generate GDP contraction, inflation, currency depreciation, and domestic political costs sufficient to induce policy change. However, political economy theory provides a more nuanced perspective. Sanctions frequently trigger adaptive pathways that allow the state to maintain stability while reshaping institutional structures.

One such pathway involves import substitution and domestic consolidation, whereby governments redirect resources toward domestic production in strategic sectors. Sanctions often force states to protect and prioritize sectors that are critical for national resilience, effectively accelerating industrial policies that might have otherwise unfolded over decades. Another adaptive pathway is elite reconfiguration, in which control over scarce resources shifts toward politically loyal actors capable of navigating opaque systems and sanction evasion networks. Finally, shadow and parallel markets expand as informal financial systems, barter trade, and third-party intermediaries fill gaps created by restricted international access. Over time, these dynamics do not simply constrain economic activity; they reshape governance, concentrating power in a hybrid state-military-commercial complex that can endure sanctions while maintaining strategic autonomy.

Empirical Patterns in Post-Sanctions Economies

Empirical evidence from Iran, Russia, Venezuela, and other sanctioned economies illustrates several recurring dynamics. Initial sanctions almost always produce sharp economic contractions and currency shocks. However, over time, adaptation mechanisms—such as parallel trade routes, domestic production initiatives, and the development of alternative financial channels—gradually stabilize economic output. The trajectory of stabilization is not linear and often coincides with structural shifts in control over strategic sectors.

These adaptations tend to produce sectoral concentration, particularly in energy, construction, logistics, and telecommunications. Politically trusted entities gain privileged access to financing and state contracts, consolidating their dominance as foreign competitors withdraw. Financial reorientation occurs in tandem, with sanctioned states reducing reliance on Western banking systems and turning instead to regional arrangements, local currency settlements, and partnerships with non-Western financial institutions. The final common pattern is institutional militarization, whereby security organizations increasingly assume economic roles, justified as measures for national resilience and strategic continuity.

Case Study: The IRGC Economic Empire

The IRGC exemplifies how sanctions can restructure economic power. Initially established as a military institution after the 1979 revolution, the IRGC gradually expanded into construction, energy, telecommunications, banking, and infrastructure sectors. Following successive rounds of U.S. and international sanctions, particularly after the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action framework, the IRGC consolidated its influence across Iran's strategic economic landscape.

Sanctions constrained foreign participation in critical sectors, creating a vacuum that the IRGC and its affiliated conglomerates filled. These entities secured large state contracts for oil and gas field development, dam construction, road building, and telecommunications infrastructure. The IRGC's economic network is characterized by vertical integration across key sectors, preferential access to state financing, the use of front companies and intermediaries, and alignment between commercial activities and national security objectives. Sanctions did not diminish these structures; rather, they accelerated consolidation by limiting external competition and rewarding politically trusted operators.

The IRGC adapted to the sanctions environment by diversifying regional trade toward Asian markets, employing informal financial channels to bypass Western restrictions, and cultivating partnerships with non-Western firms less exposed to secondary sanctions. The organization also fostered domestic industrial capacity in dual-use and defense-related sectors, further embedding its influence. These adaptations illustrate a broader principle: sanctions often create environments in which politically connected actors gain disproportionate economic power, reshaping the domestic economy along hybrid state-commercial lines.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran controls a significant portion of the country's economy. Estimates suggest the IRGC influences roughly 20–40% of Iran's GDP through formal and informal channels. The group is heavily involved in oil exports, sometimes managing up to 40–50% of Iran's crude sales. Its engineering arm, Khatam al Anbiya, dominates major infrastructure projects like roads, dams, and metro systems. The IRGC also has stakes in telecommunications and technology companies, allowing it to influence digital platforms. It operates affiliated banks and financial networks that help move capital internally and internationally, often bypassing sanctions. Front companies and shell corporations conceal IRGC ownership and control revenue streams in multiple sectors. By capturing government contracts and crowding out private competitors, the IRGC strengthens both its economic and political influence. Its economic networks generate off budget revenue from oil, smuggling, and informal trade, supporting domestic operations and foreign proxies. Overall, the IRGC

functions as a complex network of entities that shape Iran's economy, politics, and international dealings.

Post-Sanctions Transition: Theory Versus Practice

Lifting or easing sanctions presents its own challenges. In theory, reintegration should stimulate foreign investment, enhance transparency, and rebalance private sector competition. In practice, entrenched elites that benefited from sanctions-era protections often resist structural reform. Institutional path dependencies emerge as informal systems normalize, regulatory frameworks remain weak, and selective liberalization inadvertently reinforces elite capture rather than promoting inclusive growth. The experience of Iran during the JCPOA implementation phase (2016–2018) demonstrates that while foreign firms re-entered certain sectors, entrenched domestic power structures maintained significant influence over strategic industries.

Effective post-sanctions transition requires careful sequencing. Rapid liberalization without institutional reform risks cementing the dominance of sanction-era elites, whereas phased integration linked to governance benchmarks provides a framework for durable economic restructuring and the redistribution of opportunities beyond politically aligned networks.

Policy Implications

The evolution of post-sanctions economies shows that sanctions reshape, rather than simply reduce, economic activity. They often increase the role of state-aligned networks, strengthen security-linked commercial entities, and produce hybrid economic structures that are resilient but opaque. Policymakers should recognize that sanctions are not purely economic tools; they function as structural interventions in domestic political economies. Precision-targeted measures, which focus on specific actors and financial nodes, reduce the risk of unintended consolidation. Supporting civilian economic sectors through carve-outs and incentives can mitigate elite monopolization, while reintegration strategies that combine transparency, regulatory reform, and investment diversification increase the likelihood of sustainable economic recovery once sanctions are lifted.

In designing post-sanctions engagement strategies, it is critical to anticipate the persistence of sanction-era elites, institutionalized informal practices, and hybrid state-commercial structures. By linking liberalization and reintegration to measurable governance reforms, policymakers can both leverage the potential of post-sanctions openings and prevent the entrenchment of the very dynamics that sanctions often unintentionally foster.

Post-Sanctions Road-Map for Roll-back of Economic Empire

The objective of a targeted and timed dismantlement of IRGC economic control is to gradually reduce their influence while ensuring stability, incentivizing compliance, and tying reforms to the lifting of international sanctions. The process begins with a thorough assessment and strategic planning phase lasting approximately three months. During this time, policymakers and economic analysts would map out all IRGC-linked entities, including front companies, affiliated banks, and key sectors such as oil, construction, telecommunications, and finance. Consensus-building with domestic stakeholders is critical, ensuring that authorities possess the

legitimacy and power to implement reforms. Simultaneously, a framework of sanction-linked incentives is designed, allowing phased relief for entities that demonstrate verifiable compliance.

Over the next three months, the plan enters an initial targeting and policy signaling stage. Policymakers would publicly announce intentions to gradually open IRGC-dominated sectors to private investment and competition while introducing transparency requirements for contracts and corporate ownership. Selective sanction relief would begin for compliant IRGC-affiliated entities, creating an incentive for voluntary restructuring and signaling the credibility of the reform process.

From six to eighteen months, targeted dismantlement would take place. Non-strategic IRGC enterprises would be privatized or transferred to independent managers or state-approved private actors. Financial networks and banks under IRGC control would be reorganized under civilian regulatory oversight, while competitive bidding and transparency would be introduced in large infrastructure projects. Compliance would be monitored by an independent body, potentially with international observers, ensuring reforms are enforced and credible.

Between eighteen and thirty-six months, consolidation and enforcement would ensure full divestment of IRGC ownership in key sectors, including oil, telecommunications, and construction. Former IRGC-affiliated entities would be required to adhere to strict corporate governance standards, with the complete lifting of sanctions contingent upon verification that IRGC influence has been effectively curtailed. Long-term mechanisms, such as civilian oversight and continued market liberalization, would be established to prevent the re-consolidation of economic power.

Finally, beyond thirty-six months, periodic review and adjustment would assess the impact of liberalization measures on economic performance, political stability, and IRGC compliance. Timelines, incentives, and enforcement mechanisms could be refined based on these evaluations, ensuring that the dismantlement remains both effective and sustainable. This approach carefully balances timing, transparency, and incentives, avoiding sudden shocks while systematically reducing IRGC economic control in a credible and measurable way.

Table

Targeted Dismantlement of IRGC Economic Control: A Timed Strategy

The explicandum at the core of Iran's economic challenges concerns the tightly interlinked issues of IRGC dominance, sanctions, and the country's faltering economic performance. The

IRGC's sprawling economic empire, spanning energy, infrastructure, smuggling, and tele-communications, stifles private competition, crowds out investment, and fosters systemic corruption. Through front companies and political protection, it controls a significant share of key industries, particularly oil, where estimates suggest as much as forty to fifty percent of exports are managed through IRGC networks that bypass formal channels and sanctions regimes. This entrenched control reduces state revenues available for public services and contributes to inflation and unemployment. International sanctions, particularly from the United States and increasingly the European Union, which has designated the IRGC a terrorist organization, deepen Iran's economic isolation but also complicate the dynamics of reform. Sanctions have driven the economy toward informal markets and smuggling, inadvertently empowering the very actors they aim to weaken and creating a feedback loop that entrenches IRGC networks.

The implications for Iran's economic policy are significant if the goal is to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth while reducing IRGC economic influence. Structural reforms must go beyond cosmetic fixes and address corruption, liberalize markets, strengthen the rule of law, and empower independent institutions. Removing no-bid contracts and opening strategic sectors to non-affiliated private actors would reduce monopoly rents and improve efficiency. The heavy reliance on oil revenues funnels disproportionate income to IRGC-linked networks, which undermines diversification and exacerbates volatility when sanctions impact the economy. Sanctions can serve as a catalyst for reform if tied to clear benchmarks such as transparency, anticorruption measures, and market liberalization, with phased relief offered for verified compliance. Strengthening institutions, including an independent competition authority and anti-corruption watchdog, is essential to prevent reforms from simply shifting assets from one elite group to another. Social policies that reduce inequalities and broaden labor market participation, particularly for women and youth, can stabilize political support for reform and reduce brain drain. Sanctions relief could also fund essential services such as education and health, making reforms more socially sustainable.

The evolution of EU–Iran and US–Iran contractual relationships can play a pivotal role in supporting reformers. Trade and investment agreements could be phased and explicitly linked to reform milestones, offering conditional access to Western markets and investment opportunities contingent on transparent supply chains and decoupling from IRGC networks.

Technology partnerships in energy, infrastructure, and digital services could expand private sector capacity while providing credibility to domestic reformers advocating modernization and global integration. Technical assistance programs could strengthen judicial, regulatory, and economic institutions, focusing on anticorruption, competition policy, and financial sector reform, providing expertise and support to policymakers committed to change. Multilateral frameworks, similar to the 2015 nuclear deal, could synchronize incentives, balancing rights and responsibilities while offering a clear pathway to reintegration in the global economy. Contractual frameworks must also incorporate risk mitigation mechanisms, such as sovereign guarantees or escrow arrangements, to protect foreign firms from inadvertent associations with sanctioned entities.

Summary

It would likely require at least a decade of sustained, sanctions-free conditions before the IRGC would even begin to contemplate relinquishing portions of its vast economic empire—aside, perhaps, from selective divestments in segments of the energy sector framed as serving the patriotic interests of the fatherland. We should be prepared for such a moment, however distant it may seem, and ready to respond with clarity and strategic foresight.

Transforming Iran's economic trajectory requires dismantling entrenched monopolies like the IRGC's economic network while creating credible pathways for reform supported by international engagement. Economic policy reforms must promote institutional transparency and competitive markets, while external contractual relationships with the EU and U.S. should be strategically linked to verifiable reform outcomes. A calibrated and conditional approach has the potential to empower reformers, integrate Iran more fully into the global economy, and address the long-standing economic stagnation rooted in both internal governance challenges and geopolitical confrontation.

So much more should the US-EU coordinate on the dismantlement of the PMF in Iraq in return for resumption of diplomatic relations, at which point a general pourparlers will be necessary on domestic reform in Iran upfront . Given Ali's strategem whereby he transformed the pezeshkian-paper into an occaission for maneuvering to anchor Iran interest in sanctions relief or fight against air pollution, while launching an all out attack on Israel, even as he intensified geoeconomic warfare on the world through instrumentalisation of the Houthi.

He went down true to himself.

The stench that protrudes from the rot of these degenerated pussy shocked mosque democrats, and dangerous and malign actor should be enough to bomb the regime back to the Stoneage to help Iran die or get reborn.

And fear not: We are building a state in Europe.

Or in the words of Pindar: "Water is best, and gold like a blazing fire shines supreme in the night, but if you would sing of contests, my heart, look no further than the sun; nor shall we proclaim any contest greater than Olympia". This passage reflects Pindar's celebration of the Olympic Games and puts the laurels on the head of the victor in celebration of the game's values:

The five core values (often called the "virtues") of the modern Olympic Games, as promoted by the International Olympic Committee, are:

1. Excellence – Giving your best effort, striving to achieve personal and athletic potential.
2. Respect – Respect for yourself, opponents, rules, and the environment.
3. Friendship – Building understanding and peaceful relationships across cultures through sport.
4. Courage – Facing challenges, adversity, and competition with bravery and determination.
5. Inspiration – Motivating others through commitment, achievement, and the Olympic spirit.

Traditionally, the three core Olympic values emphasized by the IOC are Excellence, Respect, and Friendship, while Courage and Inspiration are often highlighted in educational and youth programs.

https://youtu.be/lp6z3s1Gig0?si=LG4oloAOns8y1ftj

RENVOI - God's People, God's Son and God's Book

The concern for preventing the Middle East becoming the football of tommorrow's great power and upholding longstanding EU policies on forging a comprehensive peace in the Middle East should be ground enough to sue for peace and avoid marauding raids into the desert lands of the region, the cradle of civilisation for all monoteisms. Each religious community has its unique traits, each its traditions and sets of values that unites and binds, and separate them from each other as children of Abraham.

Judaism became synomonous with Israel, one of few ancient peoples of the region to survive and destined to be the chosen people for reason of distinguishing it as the leading junior partner of the dominant empire throughout its carreer. Christianity became Europe led by Post-Roman Priesthood and identified with universal empire, whereas Islam sprang forth from the desert and the eastern part of the Middle East, to spead to Asia and Afro emerging right at the moment when the Eastern Roman Byzantine empire started to vane to become the first global civilisation.

Ugarit

From Ugarit, we learn a remarkable amount about the origins of alphabetic writing, early religious ideas, and cultural connections in the ancient Near East. Ugarit, a coastal city in what is now northern Syria (flourishing around 1400–1200 BCE), provides critical insights into the context that shaped early Israelite religion and, by extension, later Abrahamic faiths.

Alphabetic Writing and Literacy:

Ugarit is famous for the Ugaritic alphabet, one of the earliest known alphabetic scripts, consisting of 30 symbols. Unlike cuneiform syllabaries or Egyptian hieroglyphs, this alphabet simplified writing, making it more accessible. This innovation likely influenced the Phoenician alphabet, which in turn became the ancestor of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew scripts. The spread of alphabetic writing made the recording of law, poetry, and religious texts more feasible, facilitating the later codification of the Torah.

Religious Thought and Mythology:

The Ugaritic texts contain mythological narratives and pantheon lists, revealing a world of gods like El (chief deity), Baal (storm god), and Asherah (mother goddess). These texts illuminate several aspects relevant to the evolution of Abrahamic monotheism:

- The concept of a chief god (El), a Sky God, with subordinate deities may have influenced the Israelite emphasis on a single, supreme God.
- Stories of divine conflict, cosmic order, and morality reflect the ethical and theological imagination of the region.
- Ritual practices, temple culture, and sacrificial systems in Ugarit show parallels to early Israelite worship.

Linguistic and Cultural Context:

Ugarit was a cosmopolitan trade hub connecting Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Egypt. The cultural and linguistic exchanges facilitated the flow of ideas, stories, and religious concepts. This context helps explain how early Israelite religion was shaped by and reacted against surrounding Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian beliefs.

Epic Poetry and Sacred Narrative:

Ugaritic epics, such as the Baal Cycle, demonstrate that literature was a vehicle for theological teaching, legitimizing kingship, social order, and divine justice. This literary culture likely influenced the narrative style of the Hebrew Bible, including its use of myth, allegory, and epic storytelling.

In short: Ugarit teaches us that the emergence of monotheism, sacred text, and ethical law did not occur in isolation. Early Israelites were part of a vibrant, literate, and religiously diverse Near Eastern world, where the tools of writing, narrative, and ritual helped shape the frameworks that would later support Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
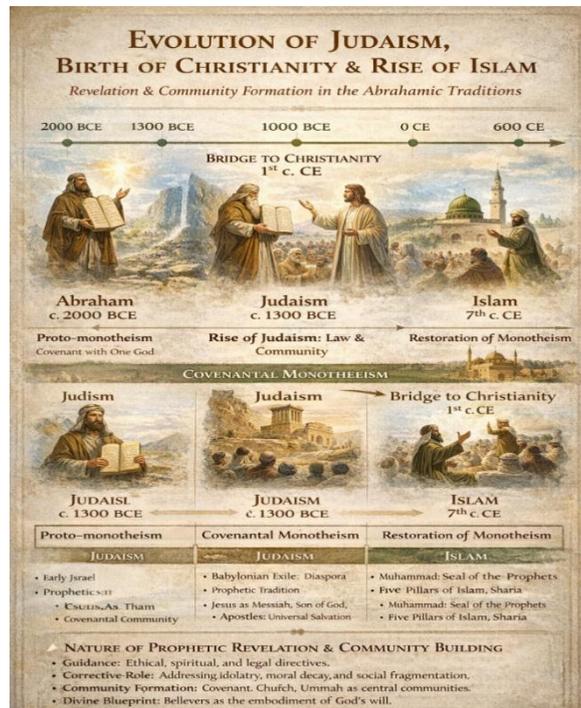
The historical evolution of Judaism represents one of the most profound developments in human religious consciousness. Rooted in the covenantal relationship between Abraham and God, Judaism established the paradigm of monotheism within the largely polytheistic context of the ancient Near East. Abraham's role as patriarch was foundational, providing a theological and ethical model that emphasized fidelity to a singular divine authority. The figure of Moses subsequently emerged as the central lawgiver, shaping the Israelite understanding of divine law, ethical conduct, and ritual observance. Through the revelation of the Torah, the Israelites were instructed not merely in ritual obligations but in a comprehensive ethical framework that intertwined personal piety with communal responsibility. The construction of the Temple in Jerusalem symbolized the spiritual and political consolidation of this covenant, yet the prophetic tradition—embodied in figures such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—remained crucial in sustaining the moral and ethical vision of the community, particularly in periods of political instability or moral decline. The Babylonian exile and the subsequent dispersal of Jewish populations catalyzed a transformative adaptation: Judaism became increasingly portable and text-centered, emphasizing synagogue worship, scriptural study, and ritualized prayer as substitutes for centralized Temple practices. This evolution highlights Judaism's enduring capacity for resilience, maintaining communal cohesion and ethical rigor across diverse historical contexts.

The emergence of Christianity can be understood as both a continuation and a radical reinterpretation of Jewish religious traditions. Originating within first-century Judea under Roman occupation, Christianity arose amidst heightened Messianic expectations and social unrest. Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher, articulated a theology that remained deeply anchored in Jewish law and prophetic thought while simultaneously emphasizing the primacy of love, forgiveness, and the internalization of ethical principles. His followers interpreted his life, death, and resurrection as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, framing him as the Messiah and Son of God. The nascent Christian community initially operated within the broader Jewish

religious milieu, adhering to scriptural authority while gradually defining a distinct identity. This transition was both theological and sociocultural, as early Christians reinterpreted covenantal promises through the lens of Christology, thereby creating a bridge between Judaism and a new religious paradigm that would ultimately expand beyond its Judaic roots.

In contrast, the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE represents a transformative response to the religious, social, and political conditions of the Arabian Peninsula. Arabia at this time was characterized by tribal fragmentation, polytheistic practices, and the presence of Jewish and Christian communities. Muhammad, regarded by Muslims as the final prophet, received revelations that would coalesce into the Quran, articulating a vision of strict monotheism and ethical governance. Islam sought to restore the Abrahamic model of submission to a singular divine authority while simultaneously addressing systemic social inequities, tribal conflicts, and religious corruption. The formation of the ummah, the Muslim community, illustrates the inseparable relationship between revelation and communal identity: ethical guidance, spiritual instruction, and political organization were integrated into a cohesive framework that bound diverse tribes under shared religious and social principles.

Across these three Abrahamic faiths, the role of the prophet exhibits remarkable continuity in both function and logic. Prophets act as mediators of divine revelation, conveying messages that are simultaneously ethical, spiritual, and sociopolitical. Their authority derives from direct encounter with the divine, yet the effectiveness of their message is contingent upon the formation of a responsive community. Revelation operates as both universal principle and contextual guidance, offering ethical frameworks, ritual instruction, and social regulations that address the particular needs of a given society. The prophetic mission thus embodies a dual corrective and formative function: correcting moral and spiritual deviation while establishing enduring structures of communal cohesion. Judaism operationalizes this through the covenant and the codification of law, Christianity through the communal embrace of Christ and adherence to his teachings, and Islam through the ummah and the comprehensive guidance of the Quran. In all instances, the logic of revelation underscores the inseparability of divine instruction and community formation: the prophet receives, interprets, and transmits the divine will, while the community enacts and sustains it.

In summary, the evolution of Judaism, the emergence of Christianity, and the rise of Islam reflect interlinked historical trajectories that emphasize covenantal fidelity, ethical instruction, and communal identity. Christianity functions as both a continuation and reinterpretation of Judaic principles, while Islam emerges as a restorative and unifying movement that reasserts Abrahamic monotheism in a distinct sociopolitical and cultural context. The prophetic model, recurring across all three traditions, reveals a coherent logic: revelation is a mechanism of guidance, moral correction, and community formation, with each faith adapting this principle to its historical and cultural milieu. Collectively, these developments underscore the profound interplay between divine instruction, human ethics, and the sustained cultivation of communal identity.

Judaism

The purpose of God's people is a central theme throughout the Bible, reflecting God's intentions and plans for those He has called to Himself. This purpose is multifaceted, encompassing

worship, obedience, witness, and service, all aimed at glorifying God and advancing His kingdom.

From the beginning, God's purpose for humanity is evident in the creation narrative. Genesis 1:27-28 states, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that crawls upon the earth.'" Here, humanity is given the mandate to steward creation, reflecting God's image and authority.

The covenant with Abraham further clarifies God's purpose for His people. In Genesis 12:2-3 , God promises Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." This covenant establishes Israel as a chosen people through whom God intends to bless all nations.

The purpose of God's people is further articulated in the Mosaic covenant. In Exodus 19:5-6 , God declares to Israel, "Now if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured possession out of all the nations—for the whole earth is Mine. And unto Me you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Israel is called to be distinct, serving as a priestly nation that mediates God's presence and truth to the world.

The prophets reiterate and expand upon this purpose. Isaiah 49:6 speaks of Israel's role: "It is not enough for you to be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to bring My salvation to the ends of the earth." This vision underscores the missional aspect of God's people, tasked with bringing His salvation to all.
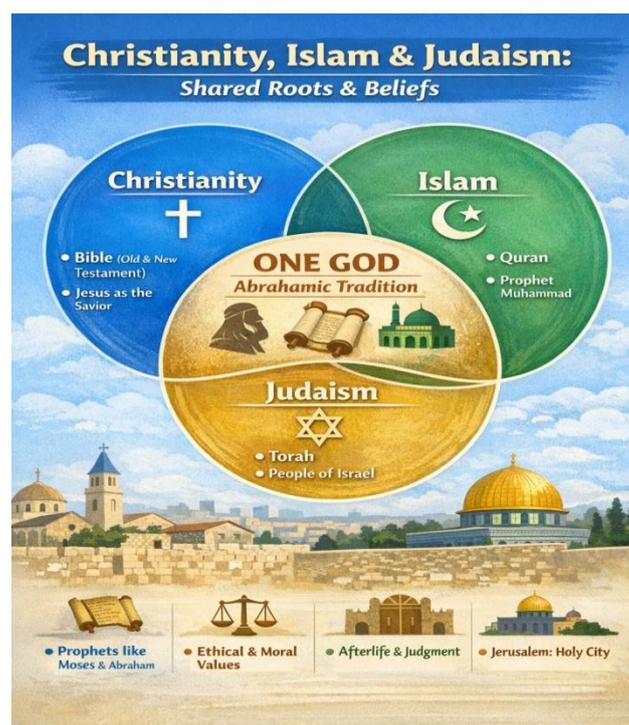
CHRISTIANITY

The purpose of God's people in Christianity is a central theme throughout the New Testament, revealing God's redemptive plan fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This purpose is centered on union with Christ and expressed through worship, holiness, love, discipleship, witness, and service—ultimately for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom.

Christ and the New Covenant

In Christianity, the identity and purpose of God's people are grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus establishes the New Covenant promised in the prophets. At the Last Supper, Jesus declares, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20), indicating the inauguration of a new relationship between God and His people.

Those who place their faith in Christ are reconciled to God and adopted into His family. As written in Ephesians 1:4-5, believers are chosen in Christ "to be holy and blameless in His presence" and are adopted as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. The purpose of Christians, therefore, begins with being united to Christ and transformed into His likeness.

The Church as the Body of Christ

The New Testament describes the community of believers as the Church, the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:27, Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it." Christians are called to live in unity, using their spiritual gifts to build one another up in love.

The Church is also described as God's dwelling place by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22). Just as Israel was called to be a holy nation, the Church is called to be distinct in character and conduct, reflecting the holiness of God in a fallen world.

A Royal Priesthood and Holy Nation

Christian identity echoes the language once applied to Israel. In 1 Peter 2:9, believers are described as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

This priestly calling means Christians have direct access to God through Christ and are entrusted with representing Him to the world. They are called to offer spiritual sacrifices—praise, obedience, good works, and lives devoted to God (Romans 12:1).

The Great Commission

A defining statement of Christian purpose is found in the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands His followers, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you."

The Church's mission is global and ongoing: to proclaim the gospel, make disciples, and teach obedience to Christ. Christians are called to be witnesses, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), bringing the message of salvation to the ends of the earth.

Love and Service

Christian purpose is also expressed through love. Jesus taught that the greatest commandments are to love God and love one's neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). He further instructed His followers to love one another as He has loved them (John 13:34-35), making love the defining mark of Christian discipleship.

Believers are called to serve others in humility, following Christ's example (Mark 10:45). Through acts of compassion, justice, generosity, and mercy, Christians demonstrate the character of God and bear witness to His kingdom.

Living for God's Glory

Ultimately, the purpose of Christians is doxological—to glorify God. As 1 Corinthians 10:31 states, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Every aspect of life—work, relationships, worship, and service—is to be oriented toward honoring God.

Conclusion

In Christianity, God's people are those redeemed by Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Their purpose is to know and worship God, grow in holiness, live in loving community, proclaim the gospel, serve others, and glorify God in all things. Through the Church, God continues His redemptive mission in the world until Christ returns and His kingdom is fully revealed.

ISLAM

Islam teaches that the purpose of God's people is to worship and submit to the one true God (Allah), live in obedience to His guidance, establish justice, and serve as witnesses to His truth in the world. The very word Islam means "submission," and a Muslim is one who submits to God.

Tawhid: The Oneness of God

The central foundation of Islam is Tawhid—the absolute oneness and uniqueness of God. The Qur'an declares in Surah Al-Ikhlas (112:1), "Say, He is Allah, One." Humanity's primary purpose is stated clearly in the Qur'an (51:56): "I did not create jinn and mankind except to worship Me."

Worship in Islam encompasses all of life. It includes the Five Pillars—profession of faith (Shahada), prayer (Salat), charity (Zakat), fasting in Ramadan (Sawm), and pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)—as well as daily conduct lived in obedience to God.

Creation and Human Responsibility

Islam teaches that humans were created by Allah as His khalifah (stewards or vicegerents) on earth (Qur'an 2:30). Like the biblical concept of stewardship, this implies responsibility: to uphold justice, care for creation, and live according to divine guidance.

Humans are born with a natural disposition (fitrah) inclined toward recognizing and worshiping God. Life is a test (Qur'an 67:2), and individuals are accountable for their choices.

The Ummah: A Community of Witness

Islam emphasizes the collective role of believers. The Qur'an (3:110) describes Muslims as "the best nation brought forth for mankind: you enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah."

The global community of Muslims, known as the Ummah, is called to embody justice, moral integrity, and obedience to God's law (Shariah), serving as an example to humanity.

Prophethood and Final Revelation

Muslims believe that God sent many prophets—among them Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—culminating in the final prophet, Muhammad. The Qur'an is regarded as the final and complete revelation from God, confirming previous scriptures while correcting what Islam teaches were human alterations.

Through this final revelation, God provides guidance for personal conduct, family life, social justice, governance, and spiritual devotion.

Justice, Mercy, and Accountability

A central theme in Islam is accountability before God on the Day of Judgment. Each person will answer for their faith and deeds. However, God is also described repeatedly as "Most Merciful, Most Compassionate." Repentance is always open during one's lifetime.

Thus, the purpose of Muslims is to live in faithful submission to Allah, worship Him alone, cultivate righteousness, promote justice, and prepare for eternal life.

Summary

In Islam, God's people are those who submit to Allah and follow His guidance as revealed in the Qur'an and through the Prophet Muhammad. Their purpose is to worship God, live righteously, uphold justice, and serve as a moral and spiritual witness to humanity, seeking success in this life and the hereafter. Whereas social injustice in Greece was at the origin of democracy, in Islam justice is central but forms part of a parsimonious religious system that each Muslim is obliged to follow at a personal level. This makes Islam an eastern sister civilization to Christianity. The point is that in Islamicate discourse the strengthening of governance and more pluralistic policy-making system are legitimate towards great accountability and participatory are legitimate demands.

Only with Greece the middle easterners share the habit of reasoning with the language and religion. If they make a strategic choice for peace, the EU must oblige Club Med and will be perceived as anti-social.

Table

Dimension	Judaism	Christianity	Islam	Shared / Overlap
Concept of God / Monotheism	One God (Yahweh), strict monotheism	One God, Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)	One God (Allah), absolute oneness	Monotheistic; belief in one creator God
Sacred Texts	Torah	Bible (Old + New Testament)	Quran	Scriptures guide moral life; overlap in prophets and history
Key Figures / Prophets	Moses, Abraham	Jesus (Son of God), Moses, Abraham	Muhammad, Moses, Abraham	Reverence for Abraham and many prophets; roles differ
Core Beliefs & Doctrines	Covenant with God, following commandments	Salvation through Jesus, grace, sin	Submission to Allah, judgment day, predestination	Emphasis on following God's will and moral law
Ethical & Moral Guidelines	Torah commandments	Ten Commandments, teachings of Jesus	Sharia (Quranic law, Five Pillars)	Justice, charity, honesty, compassion
Worship Practices & Rituals	Synagogue, prayer, festivals (Passover, Yom Kippur)	Church services, sacraments, prayer	Five daily prayers, fasting (Ramadan), Hajj	Ritualized prayer and communal worship
Afterlife / Judgment	Concepts of reward/punishment; resurrection less emphasized	Heaven, Hell, resurrection	Heaven, Hell, Day of Judgment	Belief that actions have consequences; moral accountability
Holy Sites / Geography	Jerusalem (Temple Mount)	Jerusalem (crucifixion, resurrection)	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem (Al-Aqsa)	Jerusalem holds special spiritual significance
Community / Identity	Jewish people as chosen people	Church membership, Christian community	Ummah (Muslim community)	Strong sense of religious community
Unique Features / Distinctions	Covenant with God, Chosen People	Trinity, Jesus as Son of God	Prophet Muhammad, Five Pillars	Each has distinctive theology and practices

Implications for Interfaith Dialogue: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

The comparative study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveals both significant areas of shared belief and notable points of theological tension. An examination of core dimensions—concepts of God, sacred texts, key figures, doctrines, ethical guidelines, worship practices, afterlife beliefs, holy sites, community identity, and distinctive features—provides a

framework for understanding the implications for interfaith dialogue, potential areas of conflict, and common sources of misunderstanding.

Concept of God / Monotheism

All three traditions share a commitment to monotheism, recognizing a single, sovereign creator God. This shared belief provides a strong foundation for interfaith dialogue, particularly in exploring the moral and relational attributes of God. However, theological tensions arise due to Christianity's doctrine of the Trinity, which is often perceived by Jews and Muslims as conflicting with strict monotheism. Similarly, some Christian interpretations may misunderstand Islam's emphasis on God's absolute oneness. Potential misunderstandings include accusations regarding "not true monotheism," which can be directed at Christians concerning the Trinity or at Muslims for their rejection of Jesus' divinity.

Sacred Texts

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each possess sacred scriptures that guide ethical life and convey divine revelation. The Torah, the Bible (comprising Old and New Testaments), and the Qur'an share overlapping narratives, particularly regarding prophets and historical accounts. This shared textual heritage facilitates dialogue on common moral principles and historical narratives. Nevertheless, differences in canon and interpretive authority generate tension. Jews do not recognize the New Testament, Christians affirm its fulfillment of the Old Testament, and Muslims view the Qur'an as the final and complete revelation. Potential areas of conflict include debates over textual authority, claims of textual corruption, and ideas of supersessionism. Misunderstandings may arise when one tradition perceives the texts of another as incomplete, altered, or superseded.

Key Figures / Prophets

The reverence for Abraham, Moses, and other prophets provides a rich area for common understanding, highlighting a shared spiritual heritage. However, conflicts emerge regarding the identity and role of certain figures. Christianity's affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God and Savior conflicts with Jewish and Muslim views, while Islam's recognition of Muhammad as the final prophet is not accepted in Judaism or Christianity. Potential misunderstandings include labeling other traditions' central figures as false prophets or rejecting their legitimacy, which has historically fueled polemics and mistrust.

Core Beliefs and Doctrines

Each tradition emphasizes obedience to God and the importance of moral and spiritual life. Judaism focuses on covenantal fidelity and adherence to commandments, Christianity stresses salvation through Jesus Christ and divine grace, and Islam emphasizes submission to Allah, predestination, and moral accountability. Dialogue can center on shared emphasis on following God's will, but conflicts arise over differing soteriological frameworks, the role of grace versus works, and interpretations of divine justice. Potential misunderstandings include assumptions that other faiths misunderstand salvation, disbelieve in moral law, or misrepresent the nature of God's covenant.

Ethical and Moral Guidelines

Justice, charity, honesty, and compassion are universally emphasized and offer practical avenues for interfaith cooperation, particularly in humanitarian and social initiatives. Tensions arise in the specific interpretation and application of these ethical codes, including differences between Sharia law, Torah commandments, and Christian ethical teachings. Potential misunderstandings may involve judging other traditions as "legalistic" or "morally lax," leading to stereotyping or moral superiority claims.

Worship Practices and Rituals

Communal and ritualized worship is central to all three traditions, providing opportunities for mutual understanding. While similarities exist in the importance of prayer and sacred festivals, differences in ritual specifics—such as the Christian Eucharist, Islamic daily prayers and Hajj, or Jewish synagogue practices—can serve as sources of misunderstanding or critique. Potential areas of conflict include perceptions that other rituals are superfluous, incorrect, or spiritually invalid.

Afterlife and Judgment

All three traditions uphold the principle of moral accountability, with actions carrying consequences in the afterlife. Christians emphasize resurrection, Muslims emphasize the Day of Judgment, and Jewish views are more varied, often focusing less on resurrection. Dialogue can focus on the shared ethical principle that human behavior matters, but tensions can arise regarding divergent doctrines of salvation, heaven, and hell. Potential misunderstandings include judgments about who will be saved, the role of divine mercy versus justice, and the interpretation of moral consequences.

Holy Sites and Geography

Jerusalem holds profound spiritual significance for all three religions, making it a potential focal point for interfaith engagement. However, competing religious and historical claims to specific sites have historically been sources of tension and conflict. Potential areas of conflict include territorial disputes framed in religious terms, contested religious claims to sacred spaces, and disagreements over access and authority. Misunderstandings may arise when religious claims are conflated with political interests.

Community and Identity

Each tradition maintains strong communal structures: the Jewish people as a chosen people, Christian communities centered on church membership and fellowship, and the Muslim Ummah. While these strong identities foster solidarity within each tradition, they can also create barriers in interfaith dialogue if exclusivity is perceived. Potential misunderstandings include fears of proselytism, perceived elitism, or suspicion of "otherness" that can inhibit dialogue and mutual trust.

Unique Features and Distinctions

Distinctive theological elements—such as the covenant and chosenness in Judaism, the Trinity and Jesus' divinity in Christianity, and the finality of Muhammad's prophethood and the Five Pillars in Islam—underscore the uniqueness of each tradition. These features provide both opportunities for educational dialogue and sources of doctrinal tension. Potential misunderstandings include ridicule, polemics, or mischaracterization of core beliefs, particularly when doctrines are interpreted outside their theological context.

Summary

In sum, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share considerable common ground, including monotheism, ethical mandates, reverence for key prophets, communal worship, and moral accountability. These areas provide fertile ground for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. At the same time, significant theological, ritual, and interpretive differences, particularly concerning the nature of God, the identity of key figures, and the authority of scriptures, pose challenges for interfaith engagement. Effective dialogue requires emphasizing shared ethical principles and spiritual heritage while addressing doctrinal differences respectfully, with an awareness of potential misunderstandings and areas of conflict.

Figure

Interfaith Dialogue: Common Ground, Conflicts, and Strategic Approaches

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share profound areas of common ground that can serve as the foundation for constructive dialogue. At the core is monotheism, a belief in one sovereign Creator, accompanied by shared reverence for Abraham and other prophets. These commonalities provide a rich spiritual and historical framework for engagement. Equally significant are shared moral and ethical principles, including justice, charity, honesty, and compassion, which offer neutral territory for cooperation and mutual understanding. Communal worship and strong religious identity are also central to each tradition, fostering a

sense of belonging and continuity. Furthermore, the three faiths share sacred history and reverence for sacred sites, particularly Jerusalem, which can provide a focal point for dialogue on shared heritage.

Despite these areas of overlap, several points of tension present challenges for interfaith engagement, both at the institutional and popular levels. Chief among these is the nature of God: Christianity's doctrine of the Trinity is often seen by Jews and Muslims as conflicting with strict monotheism. The identity of key figures also generates theological friction; Jesus' divinity is central to Christianity, while Muhammad is recognized as the final prophet in Islam, a claim not accepted in Judaism or Christianity. Authority and interpretation of scriptures remain areas of potential conflict, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims differ in their recognition of canonical texts and their interpretive frameworks. Additionally, ritual and law differences—including Sharia in Islam, Torah commandments in Judaism, and Christian sacraments—can contribute to misunderstandings if interpreted outside their respective religious contexts.

More specifically, Judaism and Islam experience friction over historical, territorial, and political factors. Popular perceptions often conflate religious identity with political conflicts in the Middle East, particularly around Israel and Palestinian territories, intensifying mutual suspicion. While Islam reveres many Jewish prophets, differences over covenantal promises, law, and historical claims to land generate misunderstanding among non-specialists, where ignorance can fuel fear of religious "otherness" and justify social or political exclusion.

Similarly, Islam and Christianity face tensions rooted in both theology and popular culture. Islam rejects the divinity of Jesus, which is central to Christian faith, and Christianity historically has viewed Muhammad's prophethood as an aberration or challenge to Christian claims. In popular contexts, this can translate into stereotyping or negative media portrayals, where ignorance of Islamic beliefs feeds fear, and fear in turn can escalate to social, cultural, or political conflict.

Given these overlapping areas of agreement and potential conflict, strategic approaches for dialogue should emphasize shared values and constructive engagement while being mindful of the ways ignorance can exacerbate tensions. Ethical principles and social action provide neutral, practical avenues for collaboration, allowing communities to work together on justice, charity, and humanitarian initiatives without the pressure of doctrinal conformity. Shared narratives, particularly the Abrahamic lineage and common prophetic figures, offer opportunities to explore historical and spiritual connections. Discussions of worship practices and communal structures can serve as cultural bridges, highlighting similarities while respecting differences. Finally, doctrinal differences should be addressed with care and respect, prioritizing understanding over conversion or critique.

By consciously addressing both common ground and points of popular-level misunderstanding, interfaith dialogue can not only build mutual trust and deepen knowledge among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also counter the cycle in which ignorance breeds fear, and fear in turn leads to conflict. Engaging communities with education, shared service, and open communication remains essential for fostering cooperation and reducing hostility.

Conclusions: Toward Acceptance, Tolerance, and Constructive Encounter

The comparative analysis of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam demonstrates that, while shared values and historical connections offer a foundation as vast as the horizon itself, theological differences and ritual practices continue to generate points of tension that can feel insurmountable. Recognizing the common ground—monotheism as the heartbeat of belief, reverence for Abraham and other prophets as the pillars of heritage, shared ethical principles, communal worship, and sacred history—provides the fertile soil in which mutual respect and cooperation can take root and flourish. By emphasizing these shared elements, communities can cultivate an appreciation for spiritual and moral overlap, even amid doctrinal diversity, and even when the smallest detail seems to divide the largest of hearts.

At the same time, the conflict areas, including theological disagreements—such as the Trinity versus strict monotheism, the divinity of Jesus versus Muhammad's final prophethood—the ritual and legal differences, and historical disputes between Judaism and Islam, or Islam and Christianity, cannot be ignored, and cannot be understated. To deny or avoid these differences is to plant seeds of discord, to allow the silent fire of tension to smolder beneath the surface of dialogue, to leave understanding unfinished. Here, religion becomes an allegorical landscape: the hills of shared values, the valleys of discord, the rivers of practice and interpretation carving paths through centuries of human experience. Communities must navigate these terrains with care, for ignoring them is itself a mistake greater than any single doctrinal disagreement. Indeed, by confronting the differences openly, acknowledging them, and weaving them into the broader tapestry of discourse, dialogue becomes possible, dialogue becomes durable, dialogue becomes destiny.

Equally important is addressing popular-level misunderstandings, misperceptions, misjudgments, and fear, which often arise from ignorance, cultural stereotypes, or media misrepresentations. These perceptions can hiss, buzz, and murmur through communities, amplifying mistrust, fostering social and political conflict, and obstructing genuine engagement. Recognizing that fear often stems from unfamiliarity highlights the urgent need for education, exposure, and direct engagement among communities.

Strategically, dialogue points should focus on neutral yet meaningful areas: shared ethical commitments, shared ethical commitments that build trust; cooperative social action, cooperative social action that transforms relationships; exploration of common narratives, exploration of common narratives that illuminate history; discussion of worship practices as cultural bridges, discussion of worship practices as cultural bridges that connect hearts; and respectful engagement with doctrinal differences, respectful engagement with doctrinal differences that nurtures understanding. By prioritizing understanding over conversion, by prioritizing understanding over critique, interfaith encounters can evolve, evolve into collaborative, evolve into transformative, evolve into enduring experiences.

Ultimately, the encounter between these faith traditions can be envisioned as a living paradox—a dynamic tapestry woven from both difference and unity, tension and trust. When communities consciously engage around common ground, openly confront conflict zones,

actively counter ignorance and fear, and implement deliberate strategies for dialogue and education, these interactions can plant seeds of trust, nurture the roots of social cohesion, and illuminate the garden of coexistence in an increasingly pluralistic world. Acceptance, tolerance, and structured engagement thus become both ethical imperatives and pragmatic pathways, transforming the friction of difference into the fertile soil of shared understanding.

In this process, secular Europe must root itself more deeply in tradition, while believing Middle Easterners must awaken from the dogmatic slumber that clouds the path to mutual comprehension. No geographical expanse other than the Mediterranean hungers so keenly for strong leadership, wise governance, and steady guidance from the European Union—a bridge of hope spanning seas and societies. In this interplay of cultures, the challenge and the promise lie not in erasing differences but in orchestrating their harmonious dissonance, where contrast itself becomes the canvas for dialogue, cooperation, and collective growth.

The contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the Persian Gulf cannot be understood without reference to a sequence of formative historical ruptures that reshaped power balances, state identities, and regional alignments. The British withdrawal east of Suez in 1971 marked the end of imperial security guarantees and compelled Gulf monarchies to assume sovereign responsibility for defense and diplomacy, leading directly to the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 transformed Iran from a Western-aligned monarchy into an ideologically driven republic, reconfiguring regional threat perceptions and introducing a durable axis of rivalry with Saudi Arabia. The Iran–Iraq War entrenched militarization and mutual suspicion, while the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 institutionalized reliance on external security guarantors, particularly the United States. The 2003 Iraq War destabilized regional balances further, empowering non-state actors and deepening sectarian polarization. More recently, the Qatar diplomatic rift of 2017 exposed fissures within the GCC itself, even as its resolution demonstrated the durability of institutional frameworks when political will is restored. Each of these events layered mistrust upon interdependence, producing a geopolitical order marked by both rivalry and necessity.

Today, Gulf states confront a spectrum of security threats that transcend conventional interstate warfare. Maritime insecurity in strategic chokepoints, missile proliferation, cyberattacks, proxy conflicts, and the persistence of non-state armed groups all complicate national defense planning. Equally significant are non-traditional threats: economic shocks linked to energy price volatility, water scarcity, food insecurity, and climate-induced stress. Collaborative security mechanisms must therefore evolve beyond purely military coordination. Joint maritime surveillance systems, shared early-warning platforms for cyber and missile threats, coordinated disaster-response units, and institutionalized crisis-communication hotlines could reduce miscalculation and enhance collective resilience. Confidence-building measures—such as transparent military exercises, defense dialogues at the technical level, and structured track-two security forums—would further lower escalation risks while preserving national sovereignty.

Economic integration represents another pillar of long-term stability. Despite shared geography and cultural proximity, intra-GCC trade remains modest compared to other regional blocs.

Deeper integration through harmonized customs regimes, interoperable regulatory standards, and cross-border infrastructure—particularly electricity grids, digital networks, and logistics corridors—could stimulate non-hydrocarbon sectors. Coordinated investment in renewables, green hydrogen, advanced manufacturing, tourism, and knowledge industries would mitigate exposure to oil price volatility. Economic diversification pursued collectively rather than competitively reduces redundancy, strengthens regional supply chains, and encourages specialization based on comparative advantage. Over time, such integration can recalibrate political relations, as interdependence raises the cost of conflict and aligns national interests around shared prosperity.

Environmental challenges pose perhaps the most existential threat to Gulf societies. Rising temperatures, water scarcity, marine ecosystem degradation, and sea-level rise directly affect public health, food security, and urban infrastructure. The Gulf's enclosed waters amplify pollution risks and ecological fragility. Regional cooperation can transform vulnerability into strategic coordination through shared desalination research, standardized environmental monitoring systems, joint climate-risk assessments, and integrated renewable energy planning. Data-sharing platforms and collaborative scientific institutions would enable evidence-based policymaking, while pooled investment in adaptation infrastructure could reduce duplication and enhance efficiency. By framing climate resilience as a matter of national and collective security, Gulf states can elevate environmental policy to the strategic level it demands.

To advance cooperation across security, economic, and environmental domains, specific frameworks are required. A structured GCC+1 dialogue mechanism that includes neighboring states such as Iraq and, where feasible, Iran, could institutionalize functional cooperation on non-political issues—water management, grid integration, disaster response—thereby building trust incrementally. A Gulf Infrastructure and Innovation Fund could finance cross-border renewable and digital projects. A Regional Climate and Water Security Council could coordinate adaptation strategies and scientific research. Meanwhile, the formalization of track-two diplomacy—through academic networks, think tank consortia, and youth exchanges—would cultivate the human capital and mutual understanding necessary to sustain cooperation beyond immediate political cycles.

In sum, the Persian Gulf stands at a juncture shaped by history yet open to deliberate design. Its past has been marked by rivalry and external intervention, but its future will depend on whether states transform interdependence into structured collaboration. Security cannot be isolated from economics, nor economics from environment. Only through integrated frameworks that recognize this interconnection can the Gulf move from reactive crisis management toward proactive regional resilience.

The Persian Gulf occupies a unique and enduring position in global history, defined by its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and interconnected socio-cultural networks. Historically, the region has served as a critical hub for trade, culture, and political exchange, linking Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and the Indian Ocean world. Its significance has persisted through successive empires, colonial interventions, and modern nation-state formation, underscoring the Gulf's role as both a conduit and a stage for global interaction.

Contemporary challenges in the region are multifaceted, encompassing geopolitical tensions, economic vulnerabilities, environmental pressures, technological dependencies, and governance constraints. Sectarian and ideological rivalries, maritime security threats, dependence on hydrocarbon revenues, water scarcity, and climate change pose complex, interrelated risks to regional stability and prosperity. These challenges are amplified by global factors, including energy market volatility, the strategic interests of external powers, and the pressures of globalization and technological transformation.

Despite these challenges, the Persian Gulf also presents significant opportunities for cooperation. Shared historical experience, cultural and religious affinities, economic interdependence, and common exposure to environmental and security threats provide a strong foundation for collaborative action. Economic integration, infrastructure development, joint energy initiatives, environmental sustainability programs, technological innovation, and cultural exchange offer pathways to enhance regional resilience and global competitiveness.

Effective cooperation requires sustained commitment, institutional strengthening, and confidence-building measures. Enhancing the role of the Gulf Cooperation Council, creating multilateral platforms for security, environmental, and economic coordination, and engaging in inclusive dialogue with extraregional actors are essential preconditions for realizing the Gulf's potential. By addressing internal and external pressures through collective strategies, Gulf states can transform historical rivalries into a framework for partnership, turning the region into a model of stability, sustainable development, and innovation.

The Persian Gulf countries can improve regional energy and water integration by linking their power grids. High-voltage transmission lines, especially HVDC, reduce electricity losses over long distances. Smart grids allow real-time monitoring and optimal electricity flow across borders. Cross-border gas pipelines enable countries to trade natural gas based on demand or surplus. Shared gas storage facilities stabilize supply, especially during peak seasons. Joint LNG terminals reduce dependency on external gas suppliers. Regional desalination plants can supply water more efficiently when shared across countries. Power-to-water systems use excess electricity to produce desalinated water. Cogeneration plants can produce both electricity and water simultaneously, improving efficiency. A regional energy cooperation framework can formalize cross-border electricity, gas, and water trade. Lower tariffs or subsidies encourage cross-border energy and water exchanges. Harmonizing technical standards ensures compatibility of electricity grids and pipelines. Establishing a Gulf-wide electricity market enables spot trading and long-term contracts. Regional gas trading hubs create common pricing and improve market efficiency. Private sector participation through PPPs can accelerate infrastructure development. Renewable energy, especially solar and wind, can be shared regionally to reduce fossil fuel dependence. Hybrid projects can integrate renewable-powered desalination with grid backup. Real-time energy management systems improve coordination of electricity, gas, and water. Forecasting and demand-response tools help optimize cross-border trading decisions. Cybersecurity coordination is essential to protect interconnected systems from outages or attacks.

Ultimately, the future of the Persian Gulf depends on the capacity of its states to align national interests with regional imperatives. Strategic cooperation, grounded in shared challenges and opportunities, offers the prospect of a more integrated, resilient, and prosperous Gulf, capable of playing a constructive role in the broader Middle East and the global system. The trajectory of the region will be determined not solely by its natural endowments but by the effectiveness of its political will, institutional structures, and collaborative initiatives in navigating the complex realities of the 21st century.

The time has moved on from a choice between revolution and nationalism towards well-managed, result oriented and committed sustainable and ethically minded polities, but the lag in development amidst the emancipation of the Muslim world from Western tutelage should not fool us to think that asymmetrically modernized societies like Iran does not have a role in the balance of power of the Middle East and the future of the region. Iran is by far the most westernized society in the Middle East, and at the same time the lynchpin around which the Gulfis together with the KSA could play an even more prominent role in the promotion and reform of global capitalism.

Further Research

For further research on the topic of regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf, consider exploring the following areas:

Investigate the historical relationships among Gulf states, focusing on key events that have shaped current dynamics. Look into the impact of colonialism, the formation of the GCC, and significant conflicts in the region.

Examine the role of external powers in the Persian Gulf, including the United States, Russia, and China. Analyze how their interests influence regional cooperation and security dynamics.

Research the economic strategies of Gulf states aimed at reducing dependence on hydrocarbons. Explore case studies of successful diversification efforts and the role of regional cooperation in these initiatives.

Study the shared environmental issues facing the Persian Gulf, such as water scarcity, climate change, and marine pollution. Investigate how regional cooperation can address these challenges and promote sustainability.

Analyze existing security frameworks, such as the GCC, and assess their effectiveness. Explore potential models for enhanced security cooperation, including joint military exercises and intelligence sharing.

Investigate the cultural and social factors that influence cooperation among Gulf states. Look into initiatives aimed at fostering people-to-people ties, educational exchanges, and cultural diplomacy.

Research how public sentiment and nationalism affect regional cooperation efforts. Analyze surveys or studies that gauge public attitudes toward collaboration with neighboring states.

Identify specific instances of successful regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf, such as joint infrastructure projects or collaborative responses to crises. Analyze the factors that contributed to their success.

Explore the role of technology in enhancing regional cooperation, particularly in areas like cybersecurity, energy management, and communication. Investigate how technological advancements can facilitate collaboration.

Informal policy mechanisms, such as diplomatic dialogues, cultural exchanges, and grassroots initiatives, often play a crucial role in shaping regional dynamics. Analyzing these mechanisms can reveal underlying motivations, relationships, and networks that formal policies may overlook. By understanding these informal channels, stakeholders can leverage them to build trust and facilitate cooperation, especially in areas where formal agreements may be challenging to achieve.

Consider potential future scenarios for the Persian Gulf, taking into account current trends in geopolitics, economics, and environmental issues. Analyze how these scenarios could impact regional cooperation.

Additionally, examine the linkages between sub-regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf and broader regional integration in the Middle East. Investigate how initiatives in the Gulf can influence or be influenced by developments in neighboring regions, including trade agreements, security alliances, and cultural exchanges. Understanding these connections can provide insights into the potential for a more integrated and cooperative Middle East.

Counter-arguments

One significant counterargument is the presence of deep-rooted historical rivalries. Long-standing grievances and conflicts, particularly between Iran and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, can hinder trust and collaboration. The sectarian divide, especially between Sunni and Shia populations, exacerbates these tensions, making it challenging for states to find common ground on security and political issues.

Concerns about national sovereignty also play a crucial role. States may be reluctant to cede authority or decision-making power in favor of regional agreements, fearing a loss of control over domestic affairs. The diverse political systems and governance models among Gulf states further complicate efforts to establish unified policies.

Geopolitical influences from external powers can complicate regional dynamics. The involvement of countries like the United States, Russia, and China may create dependencies that undermine genuine cooperation. Additionally, states may prioritize bilateral relationships with global powers over regional collaboration, leading to fragmented security arrangements.

Economic disparities among Gulf states present another challenge. Significant differences in resources can lead to unequal benefits from cooperation, causing resentment and reluctance to engage in joint initiatives. The reliance on oil revenues may deter states from diversifying their economies and pursuing collaborative economic strategies.

Security dilemmas arise from mutual distrust. Increased military cooperation may be perceived as a threat by neighboring states, potentially leading to an arms race or heightened tensions rather than stability. The presence of asymmetric threats, such as non-state actors and transnational terrorism, complicates the effectiveness of traditional state-centric cooperation.

Cultural and social barriers also impede efforts for regional unity. Differences in cultural, social, and religious identities can create obstacles to fostering a sense of cooperation. Nationalistic sentiments and public opposition to perceived foreign influence can further create barriers to collaborative initiatives.

Institutional weaknesses within existing frameworks, such as the GCC, may lack the necessary authority or mechanisms to enforce cooperation, leading to skepticism about their effectiveness. Complicated bureaucratic processes and differing national priorities can slow down decision-making and implementation of cooperative agreements.

Finally, conflicts over environmental and resource management can create friction. Competing claims over shared resources, such as water and fisheries, may undermine cooperative efforts. Divergent approaches to environmental management and climate change can hinder initiatives aimed at sustainability.

These counterarguments highlight the complexities and challenges that may arise when attempting to foster increased regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf, emphasizing the need for careful consideration of these factors in any collaborative efforts.

SCENARIOS

Scenario 1: Consolidated Cooperation and Regional Integration

In this scenario, Gulf states capitalize on recent diplomatic reconciliations and shared economic imperatives. Political tensions between GCC members are managed through informal and formal dialogue channels, and the Gulf states establish robust institutional mechanisms for coordination on energy, environmental management, and economic diversification. Global energy shifts, particularly the rise of renewables and decarbonization policies, provide incentives for collaborative infrastructure projects, such as interconnected solar and wind grids or cross-border green hydrogen production.

Environmental challenges, including water scarcity and climate stress, drive the adoption of joint adaptation programs, knowledge-sharing networks, and regional early-warning systems. Youth populations are systematically integrated into the workforce through shared vocational and higher education initiatives, fostering a skilled and mobile labor pool across borders.

In this scenario, regional cooperation becomes strategic and resilient, creating conditions for long-term stability, diversified economies, and stronger influence in global economic and environmental policymaking. Scholars like Mehran Kamrava have noted that functional cooperation in shared sectors—energy, water, and human capital—often lays the foundation for broader political trust, even in historically divided regions.

Scenario 2: Competitive Fragmentation and Policy Divergence

Here, persistent rivalries, geopolitical misalignments, or external interventions undermine GCC cohesion. Divergent foreign policy priorities, uneven progress in economic diversification, and disputes over energy and maritime resources weaken institutional cooperation. Economic competition may intensify as states pursue unilateral strategies to secure foreign investment or access to global energy markets.

Environmental pressures exacerbate vulnerabilities in the absence of coordinated responses. For example, water stress, desertification, and coastal flooding could lead to uncoordinated infrastructure investments or resource hoarding, increasing inter-state tension. Youth populations could face higher unemployment and skills mismatches, fueling social pressures and migration challenges, while regional knowledge-sharing networks remain underdeveloped.

In this scenario, regional cooperation is sporadic, reactive, and limited to narrowly defined areas, leaving the Gulf more exposed to economic shocks, climate crises, and geopolitical instability. Scholars caution that fragmentation can amplify vulnerabilities, especially when global energy and environmental transitions require coordinated action.

Scenario 3: Strategic Partnerships with External Actors

In this scenario, Gulf states leverage partnerships with global powers and emerging markets to accelerate economic transformation and security guarantees. GCC+1 frameworks expand, integrating technical, financial, and diplomatic support from external actors. Collaborative initiatives on renewable energy, infrastructure, and climate adaptation are co-funded and co-designed with international expertise.

While external partnerships bring resources and legitimacy, they also create asymmetric dependencies and influence dynamics. States may align their policies differently based on external interests, leading to potential tensions within the GCC. However, if managed carefully, external engagement can complement regional cooperation, enhancing capacity in energy transition, water management, and technological innovation.

The involvement of civil society and academia in cross-border dialogues ensures that knowledge exchange and local capacity-building remain central, preventing cooperation from becoming purely transactional or externally driven. Over time, strategic partnerships can act as a bridge toward greater regional integration while supporting long-term economic resilience and climate preparedness.

Scenario 4: Environmental and Economic Stress-Induced Realignment

In this scenario, accelerating climate change, extreme heatwaves, and water scarcity, coupled with global economic shocks, place severe stress on Gulf economies. States are forced into reactive, short-term policies, prioritizing national survival over collective solutions. Mass urban migration, resource scarcity, and social pressures challenge the capacity of governments to maintain public order and provide employment opportunities for youth.

Cooperation is limited to crisis response rather than strategic planning, and informal dialogue channels may serve primarily as conflict mitigation tools. Without proactive coordination on

energy, water, and urban infrastructure, regional vulnerabilities could amplify, leaving the Gulf exposed to both environmental and geopolitical shocks.

Long-term, this scenario underscores the urgency of proactive cooperation, illustrating that failure to integrate environmental, economic, and demographic planning could undermine regional stability, economic diversification, and social cohesion.

Across these scenarios, several patterns emerge. First, functional cooperation on energy, water, and youth development consistently strengthens trust, even when political relations fluctuate. Second, external partnerships can either support or complicate regional integration, depending on whether Gulf states maintain autonomy in decision-making. Third, environmental pressures are a powerful driver of collaboration, offering opportunities for early coordination in domains that directly affect human and economic security. Finally, the role of youth, academia, and civil society remains central, as knowledge networks and human capital development sustain long-term cooperative capacity.

Figure

Ultimately, the Persian Gulf's trajectory will depend on whether regional actors prioritize strategic, institutionally anchored collaboration over short-term competition. Scenarios with proactive, structured cooperation offer the greatest potential for economic diversification, climate resilience, and geopolitical stability, while fragmented or reactive approaches magnify vulnerabilities and constrain the Gulf's ability to navigate global transitions.

In the Persian Gulf, the hour demands not hesitation but deliberate action. The Gulf Cooperation Council must marshal its resources, forging regional education hubs where knowledge flows unimpeded, where the youth acquire skills not merely for the present, but for the post-oil horizon that approaches with inexorable certainty. Vocational programs must be aligned with the engines of tomorrow's economy, ensuring that every hand and mind is prepared to contribute, to build, and to endure.

Iran, too, must seize the moment. Its technical training initiatives, harmonized with the GCC, can bind the region in a lattice of shared workforce development, transforming potential rivalry into constructive enterprise. Academic exchanges across borders are no mere formality—they are the sinews of a region learning to act in concert, turning intellect into strategy, and strategy into enduring capability.

Iraq stands at a threshold, its youth eager but unmoored, its institutions in need of reform. By cultivating skills, modernizing curricula, and linking its universities with regional counterparts, Iraq can transform demographic pressure into a demographic dividend, and vulnerability into opportunity. Scholarships and joint research projects will forge pipelines of talent, capable of sustaining not only domestic growth but the collective advancement of the Gulf.

Governments must not merely govern; they must learn, adapt, and transmit knowledge across borders. Platforms for knowledge sharing, councils for standardized regulation, and collaborative governance frameworks will allow the Gulf, Iran, and Iraq to act with coherence and foresight. Institutional reform, anti-corruption measures, and participatory decision-making are no longer abstract virtues—they are the armor that shields states from internal decay and external coercion.

The environment, as ever, waits for no man. Water projects, renewable energy initiatives, desalination research, and regional ecological programs must be undertaken with urgency and coordination. Through joint environmental monitoring and shared technological innovation, the Gulf, Iran, and Iraq can convert crisis into mastery, scarcity into opportunity, and adversity into a crucible for resilience.

Innovation and infrastructure must march together. Smart technologies, incubators of enterprise, and digital transformation will underpin economic diversification, strengthening institutions while nurturing a workforce equipped for the 21st century. Cross-border governance in water, food security, and climate adaptation ensures that survival is not left to chance, but secured by deliberate design.

By 2040, these coordinated efforts—education, governance, environmental stewardship, and innovation—will forge a Gulf not fractured by rivalry but unified in purpose, a network of organizational learning and cooperative capacity, capable of weathering storms, seizing opportunities, and shaping a future defined not by circumstance but by foresight and resolve. The moment demands boldness; history rewards those who act with vision, discipline, and courage.

Policy recommendations

To transform informal GCC+1 dialogues into durable mechanisms of cooperation, policymakers should pursue concrete, actionable strategies that institutionalize trust, knowledge sharing, and joint problem-solving across economic, environmental, and social domains. First, establishing joint task forces on priority issues such as renewable energy, water management, and climate adaptation can enable technical experts from multiple states to collaboratively design, implement, and monitor cross-border projects. These task forces would

operate under shared mandates, define measurable objectives, and report periodically to senior policymakers, ensuring that outcomes are tangible and strategically aligned.

Second, creating regional forums for dialogue—both formal and informal—can expand the space for multi-sectoral collaboration. Forums could convene government officials, private sector leaders, academics, and civil society actors, providing platforms to explore innovative solutions, harmonize regulations, and coordinate investment strategies. Such gatherings could be sector-specific, for example focused on green hydrogen, desalination technologies, or digital infrastructure, allowing discussions to move beyond general rhetoric toward actionable plans.

Third, policymakers should encourage cross-border youth and academic programs to build human capital and foster shared expertise. Scholarships, joint research initiatives, and regional innovation hubs can link young professionals with practical experience in emerging industries, reinforcing workforce readiness while promoting regional cohesion. These programs also serve a soft power function, cultivating networks of informed, engaged actors capable of sustaining long-term cooperative dynamics.

Fourth, enhancing data-sharing agreements and early warning systems across borders is crucial. Joint monitoring of energy markets, water resources, and environmental indicators enables states to anticipate risks, coordinate responses, and reduce the likelihood of unilateral or conflicting action. Such mechanisms also strengthen trust, as transparency and shared evidence create a factual foundation for negotiation.

The long-term implications of these strategies are substantial. By institutionalizing cooperation around functional domains rather than political rivalries alone, Gulf states can reduce strategic uncertainty, lower the costs of conflict, and build resilience against global economic shocks. Coordinated energy and environmental policies accelerate economic diversification, ensuring that post-oil economies are supported by skilled labor, sustainable infrastructure, and resilient markets. Human capital investments, particularly in youth, generate a workforce capable of innovation, entrepreneurship, and cross-border collaboration, transforming potential demographic pressures into engines of growth.

In sum, operationalizing GCC+1 dialogues through joint task forces, regional forums, youth programs, and data-sharing initiatives offers a forward-looking framework for regional stability. These measures not only mitigate immediate risks but also create enduring structures for collective problem-solving, ensuring that the Persian Gulf evolves into a more integrated, resilient, and economically diversified region capable of navigating both the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

PERSPECTIVE

Informal policy dialogue occupies a delicate yet essential place within the conduct of international affairs, particularly in regions as complex as the Middle East and Central Asia. In the Persian Gulf, exchanges that unfold within GCC+1 frameworks or track-two forums involving Iran and Iraq serve as flexible arenas for discourse where states may deliberate upon sensitive issues such as water allocation, renewable energy, and infrastructure development without the constraints of formal treaties. These discussions operate as laboratories of trust and

understanding, allowing participants to explore common interests and anticipate challenges while avoiding the immediate pressures of binding commitments. The strength of these dialogues lies in their ability to generate shared awareness, foster mutual comprehension, and provide a stage for experimentation in policy and technical solutions.

Yet informal dialogue is not without limits. It lacks enforcement power, and without formal follow-up, ideas risk stagnation or selective application. These forums are also often shaped by political elites and technical specialists, leaving the broader societal voice underrepresented. In the Persian Gulf, historical rivalries, sectarian divides, and external influences can constrain the efficacy of dialogue, reminding us that relational trust and intellectual rigor must accompany any institutional design for cooperation to take root. Nevertheless, these spaces can catalyze broader subregional collaboration, laying the groundwork for formal agreements and networked governance structures.

A comparative perspective emerges when considering the Samarkand Dialogue in Central Asia. This forum convenes Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, often alongside external partners, to address regional security, economic connectivity, and multilateral governance. Unlike the Gulf's more fluid interactions, the Samarkand Dialogue is characterized by recurring meetings, structured working groups, and documentation of outcomes, producing concrete recommendations that inform national and regional policy. Its emphasis on infrastructural connectivity and risk mapping demonstrates how informal dialogue can be coupled with organizational learning to generate measurable progress, particularly when integrated with external actors such as the European Union, which provides technical knowledge, capacity-building support, and platforms for implementation.

The comparison highlights both convergence and divergence. In both regions, informal dialogue functions as a preliminary space for testing cooperation, building trust, and exchanging knowledge where formal agreements may be politically impractical. However, Central Asia demonstrates that structuring informal dialogue with reporting mechanisms and external facilitation increases its effectiveness and ensures that deliberation translates into action. In contrast, the Persian Gulf's informal forums remain highly relational, relying on personal trust and incremental consensus, which while flexible, may impede consistent follow-through unless formalized over time.

From the perspective of EU engagement, both regions illustrate complementary lessons. Informal dialogue provides the EU with opportunities to identify mutual interests, align priorities, and foster capacity-building without imposing top-down solutions. In the Gulf, this may involve cooperation on energy transition, climate adaptation, or cross-border infrastructure, while in Central Asia, the focus may lie in connectivity, security, and transboundary resource management. Across both cases, informal dialogue acts as a conduit for learning, bridging national priorities and subregional integration, while offering the EU a means to shape enduring cooperation through facilitation rather than directive intervention.

Ultimately, informal policy dialogue is both a signal and an instrument. It signals willingness to engage, recognizes interdependence, and provides a laboratory for experimentation. Its value is measured less by immediate formal outcomes than by the cultivation of relationships, the

dissemination of knowledge, and the preparation of conditions under which formal cooperation and institutional learning may flourish. By juxtaposing the Gulf and Central Asia, one observes that dialogue, whether fluid or structured, can generate trust, inform policy, and create networks of collaboration. When integrated with EU support and technical engagement, these dialogues lay the foundation for durable subregional cooperation, institutional capacity, and strategic alignment across borders, shaping a future in which states act collectively while respecting the diversity of their interests.

Appendix 1 - GCC+2 Maritime Safety Agreement

Preamble

The Parties,

Recognizing the strategic importance of ensuring the safety, security, and freedom of navigation in the maritime domain, and the need to prevent incidents that may threaten regional stability;

Reaffirming their commitment to the principles and obligations set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the standards of the International Maritime Organization (IMO);

Desiring to promote maritime situational awareness, facilitate joint maritime operations, enhance environmental and infrastructure protection, and prevent illicit activities at sea;

Have agreed as follows:

Article 1 – Definitions

For the purposes of this Agreement:

1. "Territorial Waters" shall mean the waters extending up to 12 nautical miles from the baselines of the Parties' coasts, as defined under UNCLOS.
2. "Exclusive Economic Zone" ("EEZ") shall mean the zone extending up to 200 nautical miles from the baselines of the Parties' coasts, in accordance with UNCLOS.
3. "High Seas" shall mean all waters beyond national jurisdiction.
4. "Maritime Incident" shall include any collision, grounding, environmental contamination, piracy, armed robbery, or other events that may endanger navigation, safety, or security at sea.
5. "Joint Maritime Safety Committee" ("JMSC") shall mean the intergovernmental body established under Article 3 to oversee implementation of this Agreement.
6. Other terms not defined herein shall have the meanings assigned to them under UNCLOS and applicable IMO conventions.

Article 2 – Objectives

The objectives of this Agreement are to:

Ensure safe and unimpeded passage of all commercial and civilian vessels;

Prevent maritime incidents and accidents through coordinated measures;

Enhance maritime situational awareness and intelligence-sharing;

Promote environmental protection and safeguard critical maritime infrastructure;

Counter illicit activities, including piracy, trafficking, and maritime terrorism;

Establish mechanisms for confidence-building and transparency in naval activities.

Article 3 – Legal and Institutional Framework

The Parties shall establish the Joint Maritime Safety Committee (JMSC) to oversee implementation of this Agreement. The JMSC shall:

Meet at least annually and convene extraordinary sessions as necessary;

Develop guidelines, protocols, and standard operating procedures for maritime safety cooperation;

Review and evaluate the effectiveness of joint operations and data-sharing mechanisms;

Resolve disputes arising under this Agreement initially through consultation, and if unresolved, through mediation or binding arbitration, as mutually agreed.

Article 4 – Freedom of Navigation

The Parties shall:

Ensure the safe and unobstructed passage of all commercial and civilian vessels in accordance with international law;

Refrain from interference with lawful navigation and notify other Parties of naval exercises that may affect commercial routes;

Implement measures to prevent maritime congestion, collision, or misidentification of vessels.

Article 5 – Communication and De-confliction

The Parties shall:

Maintain a maritime communication network, including a 24/7 coordination center and direct hotlines between operational commands;

Adopt and disseminate standardized procedures for naval and civilian vessel interaction;

Notify all Parties in advance of military exercises, maneuvers, or unusual naval activity that could affect maritime safety.

Article 6 – Maritime Domain Awareness

The Parties shall:

Share maritime surveillance data, including Automatic Identification System (AIS) and radar information, subject to confidentiality protocols;

Establish a Joint Information Fusion Center to coordinate early warning, intelligence analysis, and operational alerts;

Implement risk assessment and threat monitoring procedures to detect piracy, terrorism, and illicit trafficking.

Article 7 – Joint Operations and Capacity Building

The Parties shall:

Conduct coordinated search and rescue (SAR) operations, anti-piracy patrols, and maritime law enforcement exercises;

Facilitate technical cooperation, training programs, and capacity-building initiatives;

Develop and implement joint contingency plans for maritime emergencies, environmental incidents, and disaster response.

Article 8 – Environmental and Infrastructure Protection

The Parties shall:

Coordinate responses to maritime environmental incidents, including oil spills, chemical discharges, and natural disasters;

Protect offshore installations, subsea cables, pipelines, and other critical maritime infrastructure;

Conduct regular drills and exercises to ensure preparedness and rapid response.

Article 9 – Counter-Illicit Activities

The Parties shall:

Cooperate in the prevention and interdiction of maritime terrorism, arms trafficking, human trafficking, and narcotics smuggling;

Facilitate legal cooperation in investigation, prosecution, and judicial proceedings related to maritime crimes;

Exchange information on suspected criminal activity while respecting domestic law and international obligations.

Article 10 – Confidence-Building Measures

The Parties shall:

Ensure transparency regarding naval deployments, maneuvers, and operational plans;

Permit observation of joint exercises by designated representatives of other Parties;

Conduct periodic compliance reviews to assess adherence to this Agreement.

Article 11 – Implementation, Funding, and Review

The Parties shall:

Develop a phased implementation plan specifying operational priorities, timelines, and responsibilities;

Establish a cost-sharing mechanism for joint maritime operations, training, and communication infrastructure;

Review the Agreement at least once every three years or at intervals mutually determined by the Parties;

Amend the Agreement by written consent of all Parties, with such amendments becoming effective in accordance with procedures specified by the JMSC.

Article 12 – Entry into Force and Duration

This Agreement shall enter into force on the thirtieth day following the deposit of instruments of ratification by all Parties. It shall remain in force indefinitely unless terminated by mutual consent or in accordance with procedures established by the JMSC.

Annexes:

Annex I – Maritime Communication Protocols

Purpose: To establish standardized, secure, and effective communication among all Parties for operational coordination, emergency response, and de-confliction.

Elements:

1. Communication Channels: Definition of primary and backup channels, including radio frequencies, satellite links, and secure digital networks.
2. 24/7 Coordination Center: Operational standards, staffing, and protocols for continuous maritime monitoring and response.
3. Notification Procedures: Advance notification requirements for military exercises, naval deployments, or unusual maritime activity.
4. Distress and Emergency Protocols: Standardized procedures for issuing, receiving, and responding to distress alerts (e.g., SAR coordination, collision alerts).
5. Encryption and Security Standards: Measures to ensure secure transmission of sensitive operational information.
6. Reporting Formats: Standard forms for daily situation reports, incident reporting, and periodic maritime safety briefings.
7. Testing and Drills: Regular exercises to verify communication functionality, interoperability, and response time.

Annex II – Joint Operations Guidelines

Purpose: To provide operational procedures, coordination mechanisms, and rules of engagement for joint maritime operations among the Parties.

Elements:

1. Command and Control Structure: Definition of leadership roles, chain of command, and decision-making protocols.

2. Operational Planning Procedures: Guidelines for planning joint patrols, search and rescue missions, anti-piracy operations, and maritime security exercises.
3. Rules of Engagement: Legal and operational frameworks for handling threats, including piracy, armed attacks, and trespassing in territorial waters.
4. Coordination with Civilian Vessels: Procedures to ensure safety of commercial shipping and avoidance of interference.
5. Exercise and Training Programs: Joint drills, operational exercises, and personnel exchanges to enhance interoperability.
6. Contingency Plans: Predefined operational response to emergencies, including natural disasters, maritime accidents, or hostile acts.
7. Evaluation and Reporting: Post-operation debriefs, lessons-learned processes, and performance assessments.

Annex III – Environmental Response Procedures

Purpose: To ensure rapid, coordinated, and effective responses to maritime environmental incidents, minimizing ecological and economic damage.

Elements:

1. Environmental Risk Assessment: Identification of vulnerable areas, high-risk zones, and potential environmental threats.
2. Incident Reporting Procedures: Standardized reporting for oil spills, chemical leaks, and other environmental hazards.
3. Response Coordination: Roles and responsibilities of each Party in response planning, mobilization, and execution.
4. Containment and Mitigation Measures: Procedures for deploying equipment, dispersants, and containment booms.
5. Interagency Cooperation: Coordination with civilian authorities, port authorities, and environmental agencies.
6. Training and Drills: Regular joint exercises to test environmental response readiness and coordination.
7. Post-Incident Assessment: Evaluation of response effectiveness, environmental impact reports, and recommendations for improvement.

Annex IV – Intelligence and Data-Sharing Protocols

Purpose: To establish procedures for sharing, protecting, and utilizing maritime intelligence among Parties while safeguarding sensitive information.

Elements:

1. Types of Data Shared: AIS, radar tracking, satellite imagery, threat assessments, piracy reports, and maritime crime intelligence.
2. Data Classification and Security: Designation of sensitivity levels and corresponding handling, encryption, and access protocols.

3. Data Exchange Mechanisms: Platforms and tools for secure, real-time information sharing among Parties.
4. Timeliness and Frequency: Requirements for routine reporting, immediate alerts, and situation updates.
5. Intelligence Analysis: Procedures for joint analysis, threat assessment, and operational recommendations.
6. Confidentiality and Legal Restrictions: Rules governing storage, dissemination, and use of shared intelligence consistent with domestic and international law.
7. Audit and Review: Periodic assessment of data-sharing effectiveness, security compliance, and operational impact.

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STATEMENT ON AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is an innovative, solution-oriented technology that enhances human capabilities by automating tasks, analyzing complex data, supporting decision-making, and enabling personalized and creative solutions across diverse fields. The relationship between humans and machines assumes that machines can simulate human thinking. Humans design and guide machines, embedding reasoning and goals into their operations. Language is viewed

as a medium to represent thought for machine processing. Computational models mimic mental processes like problem-solving and pattern recognition. Human oversight ensures machines act purposefully, creating a dynamic interaction between thought and technology.

AI analyses are a digital method retrieving information stored online converted into knowledge on human prompts creating a personal context to save time in the pursuit of purposeful goals set by the researcher or his employee.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping human reasoning by redistributing cognitive labor between individuals and computational systems. Tasks that once required deliberate step-by-step reasoning are increasingly delegated to AI, allowing humans to focus on higher-level judgment while potentially reducing engagement with foundational reasoning processes. As a result, reasoning shifts from the construction of arguments toward the evaluation, verification, and critique of AI-generated outputs.

This transformation introduces risks of authority bias, as fluent and confident AI responses may be accepted without sufficient scrutiny. In terms of thinking, AI accelerates ideation and pattern recognition, enabling rapid exploration of possibilities that would otherwise demand significant cognitive effort. However, this speed can displace slow, reflective thinking that is essential for ethical deliberation and deep understanding. AI also functions as an externalized cognitive partner, reducing reliance on memory and emphasizing conceptual navigation over recall.

Over time, this may alter how knowledge is internalized and retained. Because AI systems are trained on existing human texts, they tend to reproduce dominant perspectives, which can reinforce prevailing assumptions rather than challenge them. Writing practices are similarly transformed, with authors increasingly acting as editors and orchestrators rather than sole producers of text. This shift lowers barriers to effective writing while raising expectations for originality and insight.

At the same time, AI-generated fluency can contribute to the standardization of style and voice. Distinctive expression therefore requires intentional human intervention. Overall, AI alters not only what humans think and write but how cognition itself is organized. The central challenge becomes maintaining epistemic judgment in determining when to rely on AI and when to exercise independent thought.

This piece was completed with the assistance of AI tools - ChatGPT, AI Bing, and Sharly AI - for research support and drafting. The final content was reviewed, edited, and approved by me.

ChatGPT is a large language model developed by OpenAI. It generates human-like text based on patterns learned from large datasets. In this project, it was used to help brainstorm ideas, clarify concepts, structure sections, and draft or refine written passages.

AI Bing (also known as Microsoft Copilot) is an AI-powered search and writing assistant developed by Microsoft. It combines web search capabilities with generative AI, allowing it to

retrieve current information and summarize or synthesize sources. It was used to gather background information and check supporting details.

Sharly AI is an AI research assistant designed to analyze and summarize documents. It can extract key points from uploaded files (such as PDFs or articles), answer questions about their content, and generate concise summaries. It was used to review source materials and identify relevant information efficiently.

All outputs from these tools were evaluated for accuracy and relevance, and the final arguments, organization, and wording reflect my own judgment and editorial decisions.