

Foreign Policy of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Member States Toward Iran's Nuclear Program

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Over the past two decades, Iran's nuclear program has become one of the most critical foreign policy issues in the Persian Gulf region. The member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as Iran's neighbors, have exhibited varying responses to this program, rooted in their security, economic, and geopolitical considerations. The central concern of this study is to address the following questions: (1) What is the foreign policy approach of the GCC member states toward Iran's nuclear program? (2) What impact does nuclear capability have on the foreign policies of states? This study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology with the aim of examining the positions and strategies of the GCC member states in relation to Iran's nuclear program, as well as analyzing the implications of nuclear power on international relations and state foreign policies. The findings of the study support the claim that the opposition of GCC member states to Iran's nuclear program can be interpreted as an aggressive response to the potential shift in the regional balance of power. Recognizing that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could enhance its regional hegemony, these countries have sought to undermine Iran's nuclear program through alliances with major powers such as the United States, as well as by imposing economic sanctions and applying diplomatic pressure. From the perspective of offensive realism, these efforts are not merely driven by immediate security threats, but rather by a desire to prevent the emergence of a nuclear rival and to preserve their own strategic superiority in the region. Conversely, Iran, by relying on its nuclear capabilities, seeks to bolster its deterrent power and expand its regional influence—an ambition that further intensifies the cycle of competition and confrontation.

Keywords: *foreign policy, Gulf Cooperation Council, Iran's nuclear program*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Iran's nuclear program has become a central challenge in regional relations, prompting the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states to adopt a cautious and largely oppositional approach due to their security concerns and geopolitical rivalries. On one hand, these countries are concerned about the disruption of the regional balance

of power; on the other hand, they seek to prevent Iran from strengthening its strategic position by aligning with global powers. This study undertakes a detailed examination of the positions and foreign policies of these states toward Iran's nuclear program. Analyzing the political behavior of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain in this context reveals their behavioral patterns. The present study, through examining official documents and



statements from these countries, aims to understand the underlying motives and objectives of their policy decisions.

The formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council was, in essence, a reaction to Iran's domestic developments, particularly the Islamic Revolution. The idea of forming the Council emerged in the early 1970s, during which Iran (under the Shah's regime) was also expected to become a member. However, the idea was abandoned due to Iraq's opposition and the suspicion of some Arab regimes on the Peninsula toward the Shah's role. Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the collapse of U.S. dominance in the region—along with regional rulers' sense of insecurity about the future of their regimes in the face of revolutionary expansion and the U.S.'s new containment policy—the idea of the Council was revived. Consequently, the GCC was officially established in May 1981, consisting of six countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE. In recent years, there have been discussions about the potential inclusion of other Arab countries such as Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen, but no definitive outcome has been achieved. The actual objectives of the Council were significantly different from its stated goals. These included preventing the spread of Islamic movements and the export of Iran's Islamic Revolution, safeguarding Western interests in the region, and supporting Iraq in its war against Iran. In reality, the Gulf states stood firmly beside Saddam throughout the war. Another significant action by the Council was inviting foreign powers—particularly the United States—into the region. Kuwait took the initiative in this regard, requesting that the U.S. assume responsibility for securing its commercial and oil tankers by flying the U.S. flag over them. Following the installation of American flags on Kuwaiti vessels, the U.S. Navy entered the Persian Gulf to protect them. The use of the false name "Arabian Gulf" and the labeling of Iran's three islands as "Arab islands" are additional actions undertaken by the Council in recent years to serve the interests of others and create tensions with Iran.

The conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War on one side, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on the other, disrupted the expectations of the GCC states. The occupation of Iraq, the execution of Saddam, and the establishment of a popularly elected government with dominant Shiite influence, coupled with successive failures of U.S. policies in the Middle East, ushered in a new phase in the region.

The U.S.'s Greater Middle East initiative failed, and the "New Middle East" expected to emerge from the Israeli war against Hezbollah instead gave rise to an Islamic Middle East. Concurrently, Iran's rise in both soft and hard power dimensions, its entry into the global nuclear club, and the gradual global acknowledgment of this reality transformed the strategic equations of the Middle East. The Israeli regime has lost its former capacity to intimidate regional states. Iran's political conduct in its pursuit of nuclearization has presented a new model for other nations aspiring to develop nuclear capabilities. Given these developments, the GCC member states have been compelled to reconsider their policies and seek cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran as a dominant regional power. Current relations signal convergence and rapprochement between the Council and Iran, although some member states aim to obstruct or delay Iran's nuclear progress. A persistent concern for Arab Gulf leaders has been their military and security weakness—one of the core motivations behind the Council's formation.

The core aspects of the GCC states' approach have followed a consistent trajectory regarding Iran's nuclear program. This approach has been shaped by various factors, including regional developments, the influence of extra-regional powers, the trajectory of Iran's nuclear progress, and internal constraints within the Council and its members. Iran's nuclear program gained international significance when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports intensified in 2002 and 2003, elevating Western—particularly U.S. and European Union—concerns. Consequently, EU representatives from the UK, Germany, and France initiated negotiations with Iran to resolve the nuclear issue. At that time, the GCC did not play an active or influential role in Iran's nuclear dossier.

Following the September 11 attacks—an act attributed to al-Qaeda—the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 in pursuit of the group. The outcome was the fall of the Ba'athist regime and the emergence of a new power structure in Iraq. This development altered the regional power landscape and introduced new challenges for the GCC states. Iraq's transformation and Iran's expanded strategic depth especially alarmed Saudi Arabia, the GCC's pivotal member. The emergence of Salafist groups in Iran and Syria can be interpreted as actions by some GCC countries aimed at countering Iran. Beyond the

ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, their geopolitical competition should also be noted. The culmination of these dynamics has led the GCC to adopt a firm stance against Iran's nuclear program. This study seeks to answer the following question: What is the foreign policy of the GCC member states toward Iran's nuclear program?

2. Research Background

In his book *Behavioral Foundations of the Gulf Cooperation Council*, Naeimi Arfa (1991) presents an in-depth analysis of the positions and actions of the GCC during the Iran–Iraq War. Drawing on documentary evidence, the author demonstrates how the Council, through comprehensive support of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, effectively became an active participant in the war. The work convincingly explains why the GCC failed to achieve lasting regional stability without Iran's inclusion, and how such policies ultimately led to the failure of the Arab Gulf states' security project (Naeimi Arfa, 1991).

In *The Persian Gulf and Its Issues*, Elahi (2005) adopts a historical-analytical lens to assess the strategic importance of the region over time. He shows that the end of the Cold War did not diminish the Persian Gulf's significance. Rather, its centrality to global energy resources made it a focal point of international attention. The book's analysis of geopolitical and geo-economic factors shaping regional developments is especially illuminating (Elahi, 2017).

Shahabi (2007), in his analytical work *Views of the Gulf Cooperation Council*, investigates the key challenges in Iran–GCC relations. Focusing on three main areas—security issues, the nuclear program, and territorial disputes—he argues that sustainable resolution can only be achieved through constructive dialogue and peaceful strategies. The book also offers a comparative view of the differing perspectives among the Council's member states (Shahabi, 2009).

Dehghani Firouzabadi, in two significant works (2008 and 2010), conducts a comprehensive analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. In *A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Foreign Policy*, he provides a systematic evaluation of the theoretical foundations and strategic principles shaping Iran's foreign behavior. His other work, *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, traces historical developments across different

political periods. Both sources are regarded as some of the most authoritative references in this field (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2011).

Vaezi and Asadi (2010), in their analytical book *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Foreign Policy and Internal Developments*, provide a comprehensive examination of the Council as a regional organization. After exploring the contexts of its formation and the characteristics of its member states, they detail the major challenges facing the GCC. The book is particularly valuable in its analysis of how domestic factors influence the foreign policies of member countries (Vaezi & Asadi, 2010).

Eyvazi (2011), in his scholarly article *General Policies of the Fifth Development Plan and Iran's Security Model in the Persian Gulf*, explores the relationship between national development and regional security. Employing the constructivist approach, the author demonstrates how Iran's scientific and technological advancements, particularly in the nuclear domain, influence regional security dynamics. This article is especially rich in its treatment of the evolving concept of security in international relations (Eyvazi, 2011).

Emam-Jomehzadeh and Dolatkah (2012), in their article *The World Bank of Nuclear Fuel: Challenges and Foresight*, analyze one of the most significant international initiatives in nuclear arms control. Through a precise study of the nuclear powers' positions, they show how such proposals can simultaneously contribute to non-proliferation while preserving the technological monopoly of certain states. This article remains one of the few Persian-language sources on this specialized subject (Dolatkah & Emam-Jomehzadeh, 2012).

Ebrahimi (2016), in his research article *Examining the Impact of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Capability on its Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries*, analyzes the reactions of GCC members to Iran's nuclear advancements. Based on official documents and positions, the author demonstrates how these countries—under the influence of Western narratives—have perceived Iran's nuclear program as a security threat. The article also highlights the growing military cooperation between GCC countries and Western powers (Ebrahimi, 2016).

Simbar and colleagues (2020), in their analytical article *Iran's Policy Towards the Gulf Cooperation Council*, evaluate Iran's approach during the eleventh

administration. Through careful review of official documents and statements, the authors illustrate how, despite Iran's efforts to de-escalate tensions, historical and structural barriers have hindered improved relations. The article is particularly insightful in identifying trust-building obstacles between Iran and the Arab Gulf states (Simbar, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study is conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach and employs qualitative research methodology. Data were collected through the review of official documents, diplomatic statements, international resolutions, and credible analytical reports. The information was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which allows for in-depth examination of texts and documents. The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in the theory of offensive realism, in order to explain the political behavior of the GCC member states in response to Iran's nuclear program (Mearsheimer, 2001). One of the main limitations of this study is the difficulty of accessing first-hand sources and classified documents related to foreign policy decision-making processes.

4. Theoretical Foundations

This section examines the theoretical foundations of the study by focusing on two major approaches in international relations. First, offensive realism is analyzed. Based on its fundamental assumptions, states, as rational actors in the anarchic international system, constantly seek to enhance their power and secure their survival. This theory, emphasizing the central role of power in shaping state behavior, provides an appropriate framework for analyzing states' foreign policies when faced with security threats. Second, theories of regional security are addressed, which include three key components: the concept of balance of power and balance of threat, which explores how states respond to shifts in the distribution of power; the theory of collective security, which emphasizes interstate cooperation against common threats; and the role of regional organizations in maintaining security, which analyzes how intergovernmental institutions function in managing security crises. This theoretical framework offers an effective analytical tool for understanding the

behavior of GCC member states toward Iran's nuclear program.

4.1. *Offensive Realism*

Offensive realism, as a principal branch of the realist school in international relations, is built upon the premise that states inherently seek to increase their power. In the anarchic structure of international relations, security can only be attained through power accumulation (Mearsheimer, 2001). This theory highlights the aggressive nature of states and posits that they continually strive for hegemonic dominance within the international system, which results in security rivalries and escalated tensions (Waltz, 1979). The core assumptions of this theory include a focus on the state as the primary actor, rationality in strategic decision-making, and the importance of international system structure in shaping state behavior (Jervis, 1978).

Within the framework of offensive realism, power and security are two interrelated concepts that define state behavior. Power is seen as a means to guarantee national survival and security, and states constantly endeavor to reinforce their position in the international system through enhanced military and economic capabilities (Morgenthau, 1948). From this perspective, security is relative, compelling states to compete with other international actors to attain it (Walt, 1987). Such competition may manifest in regional expansionism, the formation of military alliances, or the pursuit of advanced weaponry.

Offensive realism provides a suitable analytical lens for examining state foreign policy under security threats. It is especially relevant in analyzing the conduct of regional powers and their responses to shifts in the balance of power. For instance, this theory can be applied to analyze the foreign policy of the GCC states regarding Iran's nuclear program, as these countries aim to preserve the regional balance of power. Moreover, the theory explains why some states seek to develop nuclear capabilities and how such actions intensify regional security rivalries.

4.2. *Theories of Regional Security*

4.2.1. *Balance of Power and Balance of Threat*

The balance of power theory, a foundational pillar of international relations, holds that states seek to prevent

the dominance of a hegemonic power by establishing equilibrium in the international system. This theory is also applicable at the regional level, illustrating how states react to external threats. Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory expands on this notion by asserting that states balance not only against power but also against real or perceived threats (Walt, 1987). This theory is particularly useful in analyzing the behavior of GCC states toward Iran's nuclear program, as these states perceive it as a threat to their regional security.

4.2.2. *Collective Security Theory*

The collective security theory is based on the premise that security is a public good and that all members of the international community share responsibility for its maintenance. Rooted in liberalist thought, the theory suggests that countries can ensure collective security through cooperation and the establishment of international institutions. At the regional level, this theory explains why countries turn to organizations such as the GCC to safeguard themselves against common threats (Barnett & Gause, 1998). Nevertheless, a key criticism of this theory is that, in practice, states often prioritize their national interests over collective goals.

4.2.3. *The Role of Regional Organizations in Security Provision*

Regional organizations like the GCC play a significant role in maintaining the security of their member states. These organizations provide a framework for security and military cooperation, helping member states defend against external threats. For instance, the GCC has sought to ensure collective security through the establishment of the Peninsula Shield Force. However, the effectiveness of such organizations depends on various factors including the level of member state convergence, the presence of strong leadership, and the organization's ability to respond to threats.

5. **The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Nature and Structure**

5.1. *History of the Establishment of the GCC*

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established on May 25, 1981 (4 Khordad 1360 in the Iranian calendar) through the signing of its founding charter by six Arab

Gulf countries—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain—in Abu Dhabi. The origins of this regional organization can be traced to key regional developments in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These include the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the collapse of the Pahlavi regime, which altered the regional balance of power; the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980; and the Arab Gulf states' security concerns regarding the spread of revolutionary ideology. These developments were among the primary drivers behind the formation of the GCC (Naeimi Arfa, 1991). The Arab states of the Gulf, recognizing their vulnerability to regional shifts, deemed it necessary to create a coordinating institution. According to Jamal Abdul Nasser, a Gulf affairs researcher, the establishment of the GCC was primarily a defensive reaction to regional developments and an attempt to form a unified Arab front against Iran.

5.2. *Goals and Missions of the Council*

The objectives of the GCC can be grouped into three general categories: political, economic, and security-related. In the political realm, the Council seeks to coordinate the positions of member states on the international stage and to strengthen their political cooperation. Economically, its primary goals include establishing a common market, harmonizing financial and economic policies, and enhancing cooperation in industrial and agricultural sectors. However, the most fundamental goal of the Council lies in its security dimension, encompassing defense cooperation, the establishment of joint security systems, and confronting external threats (Vaezi & Asadi, 2010).

5.3. *Organizational Structure and Decision-Making*

The organizational structure of the GCC consists of four main bodies: the Supreme Council (composed of heads of state), the Ministerial Council (comprising foreign ministers), the Secretariat-General (as the executive body), and the Commission for Dispute Resolution. The Supreme Council, being the highest decision-making authority, convenes annually, and its resolutions are adopted based on consensus. While this decision-making mechanism respects the sovereign equality of all members, it has occasionally resulted in slow decision-making processes (Shahabi, 2009).

5.4. Security and Defense Policies of the Council

The GCC's security policies can be divided into two distinct periods: the first, from its establishment to the 1991 Gulf War, focused primarily on external threats—namely Iran and Iraq; and the second, from 1991 onwards, marked by increasing attention to internal threats and human security concerns. The Council's most prominent security initiative was the formation of a joint military force known as the "Peninsula Shield" in 1984, aimed at creating a collective defense mechanism against external threats. Anthony Cordesman, a senior analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, notes that although the Council has undertaken various forms of security cooperation, longstanding rivalries among member states—especially between Saudi Arabia and the UAE—have hindered the development of a fully integrated security system (Cordesman, 2003).

5.5. The Council's Foreign Relations with Global Powers

The GCC's foreign relations with global powers have been shaped by two main factors: the need for security and military support, and economic dependence on oil exports. The United States, as the Council's principal security partner, has signed extensive defense agreements with GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Concurrently, the Council maintains deep economic ties with the European Union and Asian countries such as China and Japan. According to Simbar and colleagues, GCC countries in recent years have sought to diversify their foreign relations and reduce their dependency on the West, with China emerging as the primary trade partner for many of them (Simbar, 2020). Jonathan Fulton, in his book *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*, emphasizes that China has become a key strategic and economic actor in the region (Fulton, 2019).

An analysis of the nature and structure of the GCC reveals that over the past four decades, the organization has undergone significant transformations—from a rudimentary security-focused body into a relatively complex institution engaged in a broad array of political, economic, and cultural activities. Nevertheless, structural challenges—such as the consensus-based decision-making mechanism and longstanding inter-

member disputes—continue to limit the Council's operational effectiveness.

6. Iran's Nuclear Program and Its Regional Implications

6.1. Phases of Iran's Nuclear Program Development

Iran's nuclear program has undergone a significant historical evolution, with its roots tracing back to the 1950s. During this period, with technical and scientific support from the United States under the global "Atoms for Peace" initiative, Iran took its first fundamental steps toward acquiring nuclear technology. The establishment of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) in 1955, the launch of the Tehran Nuclear Research Center with U.S. assistance in 1957, and the commissioning of the Tehran Research Reactor in 1967 were key milestones of this era (Gharibabadi, 2008).

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's nuclear program faced a temporary halt due to the regime change and the departure of foreign experts. In the 1980s, the program was revived due to the country's growing energy needs and the necessity for scientific development. The establishment of the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center in 1986 and the initiation of uranium enrichment activities in the 1990s marked critical turning points. After the exposure of the Natanz and Arak nuclear sites by opposition groups in 2002, Iran's program became a major international issue and has since remained one of the central points of contention between Iran and the international community (Khalilinejad, 2023).

The development of Iran's nuclear program can be analyzed in five distinct phases: the period of cooperation with the West (1950–1979), the stagnation and reassessment phase (1979–1988), the independent revival and expansion phase (1988–2002), the exposure and international pressure phase (2002–2013), and the negotiation and agreement phase (2013–present). Each phase presents unique characteristics, challenges, and achievements essential to a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Shakeri, 2018).

6.2. Iran's Position on the Nuclear Issue

The Islamic Republic of Iran's official position on its nuclear program has consistently rested on firm and unwavering principles, repeatedly emphasized in high-

level national policy documents and public statements by senior officials. These core principles include the legitimate and inalienable right of all states to peaceful nuclear energy use under Article IV of the NPT, a categorical rejection of nuclear weapons as contrary to Islamic law and the foundational tenets of Iran's foreign policy, and full adherence to international obligations within globally accepted legal frameworks (Shakeri, 2018).

Iranian leaders—from the Supreme Leader to successive presidents and foreign ministers—have consistently asserted that the country's nuclear activities are entirely peaceful and intended solely for scientific, research, medical, and energy purposes. Iran also invokes its historical record as one of the original signatories of the NPT in 1968 and a committed member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), emphasizing that it has complied with its international obligations and subjected its nuclear program to rigorous IAEA oversight (Khalilinejad, 2023).

At the same time, the Islamic Republic has consistently maintained that its scientific and technological advancement, including in the nuclear domain, constitutes a sovereign and national right that is non-negotiable and not subject to external compromise. These positions—whether during intensive negotiations or under severe sanctions—have remained unchanged and are widely regarded as red lines in Iran's foreign policy.

6.3. *International Reactions to Iran's Nuclear Program*

The international community's response to Iran's nuclear program over the past four decades has ranged from intense sanctions to strategic agreements. In the early 2000s, when the nuclear crisis emerged, most Western powers—particularly the United States and EU member states—imposed escalating economic, political, technological, and military sanctions aimed at halting Iran's nuclear progress. These sanctions, enacted both through UN Security Council resolutions (Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835, and 1929) and unilaterally by Western nations, impacted nearly every vital sector of Iran's economy—including oil and gas, banking and finance, and air and maritime transport.

With a shift in the global political climate and the inauguration of Iran's eleventh administration, intensive negotiations began between Iran and the P5+1 (China,

France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, plus Germany). These talks culminated in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 after 20 months of complex negotiations. The JCPOA—one of the most intricate and comprehensive diplomatic agreements in recent decades—led to the lifting of a significant portion of international sanctions and a relative normalization of Iran's relations with the international community (Dastneyan, 2023).

However, this period of détente was short-lived. The Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 led to the reimposition of even harsher sanctions on Iran—more extensive and severe than those prior to the JCPOA. This move, which was opposed by the remaining JCPOA parties, once again inflamed international tensions and reverted Iran's relations with the West to a state of crisis.

6.4. *Impact of Iran's Nuclear Program on Regional Power Balance*

Arab Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—have consistently viewed Iran's nuclear advancements as a severe threat to their national security and regional stability. In response, they have employed extensive diplomatic, economic, and media strategies to contain Iran's program. These concerns have fueled unprecedented expansions in their security and military cooperation with global powers, particularly the United States. Consequences of this approach include dramatic increases in military budgets (in some cases exceeding 10% of GDP), large-scale purchases of advanced weaponry (e.g., fifth-generation fighter jets, missile defense systems, and warships), long-term security agreements, and expanded U.S. military presence on their soil.

On the other hand, Iran has utilized its nuclear program to elevate its position in regional dynamics and enhance its international bargaining power. Achievements such as mastering the nuclear fuel cycle, developing advanced centrifuges, and maintaining nuclear capabilities despite severe sanctions have enabled Iran to emerge as a regional technological power (Abdoli & Sour, 2020).

This intensifying rivalry has transformed the Persian Gulf into one of the most geopolitically volatile and security-sensitive areas in the world. Heightened sectarian tensions, an accelerating arms race (especially in the missile domain), the formation of new regional

alliances, and the involvement of extra-regional powers have all contributed to a deteriorating security landscape across the region.

7. Foreign Policy of GCC Member States Toward Iran

7.1. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently been characterized by intense rivalry and comprehensive confrontation. This hostile stance is rooted in several key factors, including sectarian differences (Sunni–Shia divide), competition for leadership in the Islamic world, geopolitical tensions in the Persian Gulf, and concerns over Iran's growing influence in Arab countries. As the dominant power within the GCC, Saudi Arabia has, over the past four decades, employed all available diplomatic, economic, and media tools to contain Iran's regional influence. The Kingdom has taken a hardline stance on Iran's nuclear program by fully supporting international sanctions, strengthening security cooperation with the West, and forging anti-Iran regional coalitions. Its military budget surpassing 10% of GDP—making it the world's largest arms importer—is a clear indication of the Kingdom's heightened security anxieties over Iran's growing power in the region (Dastneyan, 2023).

7.2. United Arab Emirates' Foreign Policy

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has adopted a complex and dual-track policy toward Iran in recent years. On the one hand, due to deep economic interdependence and geographical proximity, the UAE maintains substantial trade relations with Iran—particularly in the fields of exports, imports, goods transit, and shared border markets. On the other hand, the UAE aligns itself fully with Saudi Arabia and the West on security matters. The country has actively supported international sanctions on Iran during the nuclear crisis and, by hosting U.S. military bases, plays a crucial role in the strategy to contain Iran. However, in recent years, signs of de-escalation have emerged in the UAE's foreign policy toward Iran, driven by changing regional dynamics, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the necessity of cooperation on regional issues such as Yemen (Abdoli & Sour, 2020).

7.3. Qatar's Foreign Policy

Compared to other GCC member states, Qatar has maintained a more moderate and differentiated stance toward Iran. This small Gulf state has sustained stable diplomatic and economic relations with Tehran and has frequently attempted to play a mediating role in regional crises. Owing to various factors—such as geographic proximity, security dependency (particularly after the Saudi-led blockade in 2017), and shared ownership of the North Dome/South Pars gas field—Qatar has strategic incentives to maintain cordial ties with Iran. Regarding the nuclear issue, while Qatar officially aligns with the GCC's general stance, it has refrained from adopting harsh positions against Iran and has occasionally acted as a communication channel between Iran and the West (Nezam al-Marzouk, 2021).

7.4. Kuwait's Foreign Policy

Kuwait, with a significant Shia population (approximately 30%) and a long history of economic relations with Iran, has sought to strike a delicate balance between its relations with Tehran and its commitments to the GCC. While wary of Iran's regional influence, Kuwait has resisted fully aligning with Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran bloc. On the nuclear issue, Kuwait has generally adopted a moderate stance and has occasionally played the role of mediator between Iran and Arab states. Its unique geographic position—bordering Iraq and being close to Iran—along with the presence of Shia communities in its political structure, have encouraged Kuwaiti policymakers to take a cautious and pragmatic approach to Iran (Ghaemi Mehr & Gholami, 2022).

7.5. Bahrain's Foreign Policy

Due to its unique demographic composition—where a Shia majority is governed by a Sunni Al Khalifa monarchy—Bahrain has adopted the most antagonistic position toward Iran among the GCC members. The Bahraini government has consistently blamed Iran for its internal unrest and has used every opportunity to rally international pressure against Tehran. In the nuclear arena, Bahrain has actively supported severe sanctions against Iran and hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet, showcasing its deep security alignment with Western powers. The

country's internal vulnerabilities and fear of Shia mobilization under Iranian influence have positioned Bahrain at the forefront of anti-Iran regional policies (Nezam al-Marzouk, 2021).

7.6. *Oman's Foreign Policy*

Oman, owing to its distinct geography and tradition of independent foreign policy, has consistently maintained stable and friendly relations with Iran. It played a vital mediating role in the nuclear crisis, hosting secret U.S.–Iran negotiations in Muscat. Through a balanced and interest-driven approach, Oman has tried to harmonize its GCC obligations with its bilateral ties to Tehran. Several factors—including historical, cultural, and religious commonalities (e.g., Ibadi Islam), its strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz, and lower dependence on oil—have enabled Oman to pursue an independent foreign policy toward Iran. Oman has taken a relatively neutral position on the nuclear issue and consistently advocated for diplomatic resolution of conflicts (Abdoli & Sourì, 2020).

7.7. *Comparative Analysis of Member States' Positions*

A comparative analysis of the GCC member states' positions toward Iran places them along a continuum ranging from adversarial to cooperative. At one end of the spectrum are Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, whose highly hostile policies portray Iran as an existential threat to national and regional security. In the middle are the UAE and Kuwait, which pursue dual-track strategies involving economic cooperation alongside security confrontation. At the cooperative end are Qatar and Oman, which adopt moderate and at times amicable stances toward Iran. These strategic differences are shaped by several factors: demographic and sectarian composition, historical relations with Iran, level of Western dependency, economic development, political systems, and regional status.

This strategic divergence reveals that the GCC, despite its outward appearance of unity, faces profound internal divisions in its approach to Iran. The foreign policy positions of its member states vary significantly—shaped by distinct political structures, demographic realities, degrees of Western alignment, and bilateral experiences with Iran. On one side, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain adopt hostile policies, viewing Iran as their

primary rival and national security threat. On the other side, Oman—and to some extent Qatar—pursue pragmatic, interest-based diplomacy. Meanwhile, the UAE and Kuwait exhibit cautious and dual-track policies, reflecting the tension between economic interests and security concerns. These divergences suggest that the GCC, though institutionally unified, may experience weakened cohesion in the long term due to its internal contradictions regarding Iran.

8. Conclusion

An examination of the behavior and positions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states in recent years reveals a distinct behavioral pattern toward Iran's nuclear program. Despite internal differences and divergent national interests, these countries have exhibited a relatively coordinated approach to this specific issue. A detailed analysis of official documents, policy statements, analytical reports, and practical measures shows that they regard Iran's nuclear program not merely as a technological matter, but as a strategic challenge with broad security and geopolitical ramifications.

On a practical level, the manifestations of this concern can be traced through several key dimensions: first, the significant enhancement of security and military cooperation with extra-regional powers, particularly the United States, including major arms deals and the hosting of military bases; second, efforts to establish regional oversight and control mechanisms with the support of international institutions; third, extensive investment in the development of domestic defense and security capabilities; and fourth, the use of diplomatic leverage within international organizations to exert pressure on Iran. Collectively, these actions confirm that the GCC states perceive Iran's nuclear program as a serious threat to the regional balance of power.

The history of the GCC's formation indicates that countering external security threats has consistently been one of its core objectives. A review of its founding documents and subsequent developments underscores that its members have sought to create a framework for coordination in the face of common security challenges. In this context, Iran's nuclear program—arguably the most significant security challenge of the past few decades—has elicited a more synchronized response from GCC countries.

Historical experience in international relations demonstrates that acquiring nuclear technology can yield contradictory outcomes for a state's international standing. On the one hand, such technology may enhance a country's bargaining power and global credibility. On the other hand, it may provoke negative reactions from the international community and exacerbate political isolation. In Iran's case, regional countries appear to focus more on the latter, believing that its nuclear progress poses risks to regional stability.

Analyzing this issue through the lens of international relations theory—particularly offensive realism—suggests that the behavior of regional states can be interpreted as efforts to preserve the balance of power. According to this theory, states in the international system are constantly striving to prevent the emergence of regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). The balance of threat theory also provides a strong explanation for why states with different political systems may choose to cooperate in the face of what they perceive as a common threat (Walt, 1987). In this dynamic, the role of regional organizations such as the GCC is crucial, as they offer platforms for coordinating such collective responses.

This analysis reveals that Iran's nuclear program, as a critical variable, has deeply influenced the region's security dynamics. Its impact is evident not only in Iran's bilateral relations with neighboring countries but also in broader developments in regional security. Moving forward, this trend may intensify security and arms competition in the region unless effective trust-building mechanisms and dialogue frameworks are established between the parties. Nonetheless, experience has shown that regional and international developments may shift these dynamics and open new pathways in regional relations.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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