

**Reconfiguring the Regional Security Architecture in the Persian Gulf: Intra-GCC Conflicts, Relations with Iran, and Great Power Interests**  
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**Abstract:** The member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)- were often characterized as being a part of a singular unit and assumed to be following the same foreign policy objectives. While it had always been the case, the imposition of a blockade on Qatar in 2017 proved that the GCC states are not in lockstep and that many intra-GCC conflicts exist. Two of the most important and apparent of these conflicts are the differences in their foreign policy approaches toward Iran and reconfiguring the regional security architecture.

The GCC states do not have a unified policy towards Iran, and each state has a unique approach based on its diplomatic, economic, and security considerations. Moreover, each GCC state's foreign policy decision-making calculus toward Iran includes various internal, regional, and international factors. For some, Iran has almost-always been a primary security concern. Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceive Iran's regional policies as directly targeted at challenging their regional influence, and Bahrain views Tehran as a challenger to its survival. On the other hand, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait have been compartmentalizing their concerns and interests when dealing with Iran. The same divide is true with regard to reconfiguring the regional security architecture.

In the context of the regional security architecture, the United States has always been a key player. More recently, in 2015, it was President Obama's policies that led to the Iran Nuclear Deal, and it was he who advised that the GCC states should "share the region with Iran." In 2017, President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign inhibited the actual implementation of those policy changes and set-in motion a series of new geopolitical shifts in the region. The imposition and end of the blockade on Qatar, the normalization of relations between some GCC states and Israel through the Abraham Accord, and continuous military tensions in the Persian Gulf are all legacies of the Trump Administration. Now, in 2021, Biden's presidency has brought with it another wave of shifts in the foreign policy approaches of the GCC states.

Reconfiguration of the current security architecture is inevitable. The path ahead depends on whether the GCC states accept an inclusive framework or not. The actions by global powers and actors in the broader region will shape the GCC states' outlook. Moreover, the willingness of European and Asian powers to engage both Iran and the GCC states is entirely different compared to the United States' one-sided approach toward the Persian Gulf region. China, Russia, and some European countries have expressed their interest in facilitating dialogue in the region. The involvement of more external players is further complicating the already complex Great Power competition in the region.

This paper uses traditional theories in International Relations and modern concepts under the umbrella of Foreign Policy Analysis. Through this approach, the paper has a holistic theoretical and conceptual framework to differentiate the foreign policy approaches of the GCC States toward the reconfiguration of the regional security architecture.



**Bio:** Mehran Haghirian is the Director of Regional Initiatives at the Bourse & Bazaar Foundation, a think tank focused on economic diplomacy, economic development, and economic justice in the Middle East and Central Asia. In this role, Mehran draws on his extensive background researching regional political and security frameworks. He is a PhD candidate at Qatar University, where he focuses on the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf region, and holds a master's degree in international affairs from American University's School of International Service in Washington DC. Prior to joining B&BF, Mehran worked at the Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences as a researcher and assistant director and at the Atlantic Council's Future of Iran Initiative as a project assistant.

