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The GCC-Iran Rapprochement

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Cover image: One of four Iranian naval vessels docked at Port Khalid in Sharjah during the first naval visit to the UAE, 3 February 2025 (photo: Emirates News Agency, WAM).

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If prophecies were founded in words, then former US president Barack Obama's remarks that Saudi Arabia and Iran should find a way to "share the neighbourhood and institute some kind of cold peace" have now come true.¹ Days after Iran launched its second missile attack against Israel on 1 October, Saudi Arabia's navy joined Iran's naval

¹ Susan Heavey, "Saudi Arabia, Iran Must Shape 'Cold Peace,' Obama Says", Reuters, 11 March 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/saudi-arabia-iran-must-shape-cold-peace-obama-says-idUSKCN0WC2BJ/>.

forces for a joint exercise alongside other navies in the Gulf of Oman, a first for the two long-time geopolitical and ideological foes.² The defence diplomacy between the two countries continued a month later with Saudi Arabia's armed forces chief of general staff visiting Tehran.³

Separately, on 3 February, four Iranian naval vessels made a three-day visit to Port Khalid, Sharjah, the first naval exchange between Iran and the UAE. The visit was portrayed as part of an exchange of visits between the two navies to enhance maritime security and ensure freedom of navigation in the region.⁴

A Sea Change in the Gulf

That the rapprochement between Iran and its Arab Gulf neighbours, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has reached a point where they now even engage in defence interactions represents a sea change from the regional climate during Donald Trump's first term as US president. At that time, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama voiced support for Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran.⁵ Saudi Arabia and the UAE also previously opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) brokered by the Obama administration on Iran's

² Iran's naval commander even claimed that Saudi Arabia had asked his country to organise naval drills in the Red Sea. See *New Arab*, "Saudi-Iran military drills highlight regional foes' warming ties amid Gaza war", 24 October 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/saudi-iran-military-drills-highlight-warming-ties-amid-gaza-war>.

³ Meeting with the visiting Saudi army chief, Iran's chief of staff of the armed forces was said to have invited the Saudi navy to this year's Iranian naval exercise, either as participant or observer. See Al Jazeera, "Saudi Armed Forces Chief Visits Iranian Counterpart for Rare Meeting", 10 November 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/10/saudi-armed-forces-chief-visits-iranian-counterpart-for-rare-meeting>.

⁴ WAM (Emirates News Agency), "Four Iranian navy vessels arrive at Port Khalid in Sharjah", 3 February 2025, <https://www.wam.ae/article/bi0lyv4-four-iranian-navy-vessels-arrive-port-khalid>.

⁵ Filipe Pacheco, "Saudi Arabia says it supports US 'Maximum Pressure Campaign' on Iran", *Bloomberg*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-21/saudi-arabia-supports-u-s-maximum-pressure-campaign-on-iran>.

nuclear ambitions, stressing that such an agreement was insufficient in dealing with the threats posed by Iran and its proxies.⁶

The growing détente between Iran and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the past several years is driven by different motivations on the two sides but is essentially grounded in pragmatism. For the Gulf Arab leaderships, the driving force is their conviction that they need to take responsibility for their own security, given their growing perception that US security guarantees are unreliable. That perception would have been reinforced by events following the 7 October 2023 kidnapping of Israelis by Hamas. More broadly, the domestic agendas of the Gulf capitals, particularly Riyadh, to wean themselves off oil place regional stability as a prerequisite for economic restructuring. For Iran, which has been considerably weakened through the elimination of its proxies by Israeli operations, regional diplomacy, which in recent years was a matter of pragmatism to break out of economic isolation, is now a necessity to avoid further degradation of its geopolitical position.

The Beginnings of the Thaw

Iran's outreach to its Gulf neighbours can be traced to its conception of a good neighbourhood policy around late 2019. Its most significant proposal at that time was outlined at the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, when the Rouhani administration presented the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), its vision of a regional solution for "energy security, freedom of navigation, information exchange, arms control, conflict prevention, and non-aggression".⁷ Iran's conciliatory approach to its Arab neighbours was due largely to its vulnerabilities and to its

⁶ For an understanding of the JCPOA and how the Biden administration aimed to revive the deal after Trump had withdrawn from it, see International Crisis Group, "A Time for Talks: Toward Dialogue between the Gulf Arab States and Iran", Report no. 226, 24 August 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-united-arab-emirates-saudi-arabia-qatar>.

⁷ United Nations, "At UN, Iran proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'", 25 September 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>.

recognition of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's growing regional weight. A sanctions-stricken Iran saw its Gulf Arab neighbours, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as an important economic lifeline.

At the time of Rouhani's declaration, the Arab players in the Gulf region were hopeful that the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy against Iran would pay off. However, by 2022, signs emerged of a foreign policy re-evaluation among the Gulf Arabs. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran stole the headlines when they not only normalised relations following a rupture in 2016 but also raised the potential for regional stability. While China's role as a broker in the negotiations between the two countries became the talking point and, indeed, reflects the extent to which the Gulf Arab states have shifted from putting their eggs solely in the American basket, the more crucial observation is these states' willingness to take ownership of their region.

“By 2022, signs emerged of a foreign policy re-evaluation among the Gulf Arabs.”

Meanwhile, Iran and the UAE, which have had a long-standing dispute over the Hormuz Straits islands, restored full diplomatic ties in 2022. The UAE had downgraded its embassy in Tehran six years earlier in solidarity with Saudi Arabia after the latter's consulate in Mashhad had been attacked by Iranian protesters. In May 2024, the UAE-Iran joint economic commission reconvened after a decade, signalling formal economic cooperation,⁸ a shift from the previous under-the-radar trade that involved Emirati companies purchasing goods for onward shipping to Iran.⁹ Subsequently, in October 2024 the Iranian and Emirati

⁸ Reuters, “UAE-Iran joint economic commission convenes for first time in 10 years”, 30 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-iran-joint-economic-commission-convenes-first-time-10-years-2024-04-30/>.

⁹ Benoit Faucon, “UAE Trade Provides Iran with Western Goods, from Perfume to Laptops”, *Wall Street Journal*, 5 July 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-trade-provides-iran-with-western-goods-from-perfume-to-laptops-11657048268>. It should also be noted that Dubai has been an important trading hub with Iran, with a report by *Global*

presidents met on the side-lines of the BRICS intergovernmental bloc summit.¹⁰ What is significant about this turn of events is the softening of Emirati assertiveness in foreign policy that had culminated in its signing the Abraham Accords to normalise ties with Israel in 2020.

Perhaps the most important strand in the rapprochement process is that involving Bahrain. With its sizeable Shi'a population, Bahrain has long been seen as susceptible to Iranian influence. But diplomatic ties between the two countries are now edging closer to resumption, with the king of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, stating in May 2024 that “there is no reason to delay normalisation”.¹¹ Despite the persistence of sticking points, such as Bahrain's condition that Iran cease support for the Bahraini opposition, there has been an uptick in working-level visits between the foreign ministers of the two countries throughout 2024 – and in spite of the sombre regional climate.

The Push Behind the Initial Thaw

Growing concerns about the reliability of the United States as a security guarantor was one of the key factors that pushed Saudi Arabia and the UAE to seek normalisation with Iran. Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran during his first term of office failed to work; instead, Saudi Arabia and the UAE found themselves in the crosshairs of Iran's proxies. They became bogged down in Yemen, where their forces were subjected to attacks by Iran's proxies, the Houthis. Moreover, the US response to attacks in 2019 on Saudi oil installations and Saudi and UAE ships by Iranian proxies fuelled serious doubt about US security commitments. Two days after Houthi attacks on the Abqaiq oil facilities

Trade Review underscoring how Dubai-based traders have helped facilitate sales of Iranian oil. See <https://www.gtreview.com/news/global/us-sanctions-dubai-traders-for-selling-iranian-oil-to-europe-asia/>.

¹⁰ *The New Arab*, “BRICS Summit Sees UAE's MBZ Meet Iran President for First Time, to Ease Tensions over Occupied Islands”, 24 October 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/brics-summit-sees-uae-iran-ease-tensions-over-occupied-islands>.

¹¹ Nazeeha Saeed, “Bahrain, Iran Edge Closer to Normalization despite Setbacks”, *Ammaj Media*, 5 September 2024, <https://ammaj.media/article/bahrain-iran-edge-closer-to-normalization-despite-setbacks>.

in eastern Saudi Arabia, then president Trump said, “That was an attack on Saudi Arabia, and that wasn’t an attack on us.”¹² Subsequently, in January 2022, when another Houthi drone assault killed three in Abu Dhabi, the Biden administration’s response was sluggish. It took General Kenneth McKenzie, then commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), 22 days to make a trip down to the Emirati capital. That tardy response was a game changer for the UAE: its president, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, snubbed the CENTCOM commander.¹³ Arab disappointment was reflected in the Gulf Arab countries’ decision to collectively abstain in the US-led vote in April 2022 to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.¹⁴

“Since the Red Sea attacks of 2019, the Gulf leaders seem to have decided that the onus of regional security is on themselves.”

Since the Red Sea attacks of 2019, the Gulf leaders seem to have decided that the onus of regional security is on themselves, moving to engage the Islamic republic more proactively. The Gulf Arab governments’ pragmatic stance is notable in their deliberate distancing from the US-UK airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen since January 2024, demonstrating their reluctance to provoke renewed tensions with

¹² Steve Holland and Rania El Gamal, “Trump Says He Does Not Want War after Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities”, Reuters, 27 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/trump-says-he-does-not-want-war-after-attack-on-saudi-oil-facilities-idUSKBN1W10X6/>.

¹³ US Secretary of State Antony Blinken later apologised to UAE president Mohammed bin Zayed. See *Middle East Monitor*, “Report: US Apologised to UAE for Delayed Response to Houthi Attacks”, 13 April 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220413-report-us-apologised-to-uae-for-delayed-response-to-houthi-attacks/>.

¹⁴ *Middle East Eye*, “Gulf States Abstain as UN Suspends Russia from Rights Council over Ukraine Abuses”, 7 April 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-gulf-countries-abstain-vote-suspend-un-rights-council>.

Iran, nor with its proxies.¹⁵ Today, the returns on their investment in diplomatic engagement with Iran are clear: although disruptions on the Red Sea have not fully ceased, the two Gulf states have remained largely unscathed since the events of 7 October.

Behind the Gulf Arabs' quest for regional stability is a broader peace-for-development rationale. Each Gulf state has a long-term domestic vision of weaning itself off oil, making a stable backyard free of geopolitical risks an imperative for successful economic restructuring. The initiative to reach out to Iran was in fact framed within a diversification drive of international partnerships, particularly in the case of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, whose interstate engagement has included taking up BRICS membership. Five years since the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appeared on state television in April 2021, asserting that stability and non-interference in internal affairs were important principles before adding that "Saudi Arabia wants Iran to prosper and grow".¹⁶ The motivation? "To propel the region and the world to growth and prosperity", explained the crown prince. Stability is especially crucial for the Saudis as their Vision 2030 mega projects enter crucial delivery phases.

Dialogue Despite the War Next Door

The events following Hamas's 7 October kidnapping of Israelis have not affected engagement between the Gulf Arabs and Iran. Following the assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh on 31 July 2024 and the subsequent series of targeted assassinations of the Hizballah and Hamas apparatuses, a flurry of meetings ensued between the Gulf Arab

¹⁵ See analysis by Giorgio Cafiero, "Assessing GCC Perspectives on American-British Strikes against Yemen's Houthis", Arab Center Washington DC, 11 September 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/assessing-gcc-perspectives-on-american-british-strikes-against-yemens-houthis/>. He remarks that the Gulf leaderships view this Western intervention as misguided.

¹⁶ Reuters, "Saudi Crown Prince Softens Iran Rhetoric in Balancing Act", 28 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-softens-iran-rhetoric-balancing-act-2021-04-28/>.

states and their Iranian counterparts, particularly when it seemed that the Biden administration's efforts at restraining Israel were increasingly futile.

Iran's most recent diplomatic offensive to garner Gulf Arab support became evident as it found itself drawn into direct confrontation with Israel. Soon after its ballistic missile attack on Israel on 1 October, Iran's foreign minister toured several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia. The message? Maintain neutrality in the Iran-Israel face-off. It was largely intended to persuade Washington's Gulf Arab partners with an established US military presence to, first, convey the message – directly or via the United States – that Israel should refrain from targeting Iran's nuclear sites and oil fields, and, second, to disallow the use of Gulf airspace for strikes against Iran.¹⁷ Various Gulf-based interlocutors have testified to the author that Iran's message, though couched in the form of a plea, was effectively a threat, implying that the Arab states may not be spared from attack.

“The events following Hamas’s 7 October kidnapping of Israelis have not affected engagement between the Gulf Arabs and Iran.”

Iran's veiled threat seems to have borne fruit. The Gulf Arab leaderships condemned the retaliatory Israeli airstrikes against Iran in unison, underscoring their genuine concern over the prospect of a wider confrontation in the region.¹⁸ Subsequently, speaking at a special summit of Arab and Islamic states in Riyadh in November 2024, Saudi Arabia's

¹⁷ See, for instance, Samia Nakhoul, Parisa Hafezi, and Peshia Magid, “Gulf Countries Lobbying US to Prevent Israeli Strike on Iran’s Oil Facilities”, *Times of Israel*, 10 October 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gulf-countries-lobbying-us-to-prevent-israeli-strike-on-irans-oil-facilities/>. See also *Arab Weekly*, “Iran Increasingly Confused as Gulf States Stick to Neutrality”, 9 October 2024, <https://the arabweekly.com/iran-increasingly-confused-gulf-states-stick-neutrality>.

¹⁸ *The New Arab*, “Middle East Governments Condemn Israeli Strikes as ‘Violation’ of Iranian Sovereignty”, 26 October 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/middle-east-govts-condemn-israels-strike-iran>.

crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, called on the international community to oblige Israel to “respect Iran’s sovereignty and not to violate its lands.”¹⁹ His statement, which was preceded by a phone call a day earlier with Iran’s president Masoud Pezeshkian, also accused Israel of “collective genocide”.²⁰ Such messaging is a marked shift from mere condemnation of Israeli actions. The increased gravity of Saudi

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statements, in tandem with their reaffirmation of Palestinian statehood as a necessary precondition for peace, means that the Saudis expect checks on Israeli power. Likewise, Emirati statements have shifted from merely expressing concern regarding the escalation of violence between the Israelis and Palestinians²¹ to increasingly condemning Israeli actions – all this despite official ties with Israel.²²

¹⁹ *Times of Israel*, “At Riyadh Summit, Saudi Crown Prince Backs Iran, Accuses Israel of Genocide”, 11 November 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/at-riyadh-summit-saudi-crown-prince-backs-iran-accuses-israel-of-genocide/>.

²⁰ Ghinwa Obeid, “MBS Condemns Israeli Genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, Operations in Lebanon”, *Al Arabiya*, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2024/11/11/arab-muslim-leaders-arrive-in-saudi-arabia-for-summit-on-gaza-lebanon->.

²¹ WAM, “UAE Calls for halting Escalation between Israelis and Palestinians”, 7 October 2023, <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395303206611>.

²² Not only did the UAE condemn Israeli strikes on Iran, but it also denounced Tel Aviv’s decision to expand settlements in the occupied Golan Heights. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UAE, “UAE Condemns Israeli Government’s Decision to Expand Settlements in the Occupied Golan Heights”, 15 December 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/saudi-iran-military-drills-highlight-warming-ties-amid-gaza-war>; and Tom Evans, “UAE Strongly Condemns Israeli Strikes on Iran”, *The National*, 26 October 2024,

Although there is certainly some cheer among the Gulf Arabs for a degraded Iran, which they do not completely trust notwithstanding their growing rapprochement, they would also want to dial down regional tensions to pre-empt any desperate movement on the part of Iran towards a nuclear capability. At the same time, the Gulf monarchies will also be wary of an unhinged right-wing Israeli government with unchallenged military pre-eminence in the region.

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The Gulf Arab states in fact have now been given a live operational demonstration of how quickly the United States can dispatch its forces to the region – when it serves its interests. Soon after the Israeli ground invasion of Gaza began in October 2023, the White House deployed two American aircraft carriers in a bid to “deter [...] any efforts toward widening this war”.²³ More recently, deployments of US bombers, fighter jets and warships to the Middle East have been swift and decisive²⁴ – but only to reiterate the “ironclad” commitment to Israel. However these moves may be framed as a means of guaranteeing regional security, the experience has taught the Gulf Arabs that the swiftness of American deployment may not always apply to them.

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uae/2024/10/26/uae-strongly-condemns-israeli-strikes-on-iran/>.

²³ Bethan McKernan and Ruth Michaelson, “US Deploys Second Aircraft Carrier as Israeli Ground Invasion of Gaza Nears”, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/15/gaza-ground-invasion-israel-us-second-carrier-group-hamas>.

²⁴ Heather Mongilo, “US to Move Destroyers, B-52s to Middle East as Carrier USS Abraham Lincoln Prepares to Leave the Region”, US Naval Institute, 4 November 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/11/04/u-s-to-move-destroyers-b-52s-to-middle-east-as-uss-abraham-lincoln-prepared-to-leave-region>.

But the overall approach of the Arab governments remains haphazard. Particularly, consensus on undertaking punitive measures against Israel is lacking, as evident during the November 2023 joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held in Riyadh²⁵ and the Arab League meeting in Bahrain last May.²⁶ This is probably because national interests take primacy for countries like Bahrain and the UAE, signatories to the Abraham Accords, which stand to lose the benefits of economic ties with Israel by taking a stronger stand. But the aim of riding the region of conflict persists.

With a Trump administration looking to give Israeli prime minister Netanyahu freer rein, disagreements between the Gulf leaders and the newly inaugurated US president loom on the horizon should Trump permit Israel to escalate military measures against Iran. Another point of contention is Trump's outlandish Riviera-like proposal for Gaza, which tests the Gulf Arabs' credentials as supporters of Palestinian statehood and would place on them the burden of financing any reconstruction plan for Gaza.

Pragmatism or Necessity for a Degraded Iran?

While Iran's initial outreach to its Gulf Arab neighbours was driven by a desire to break out of economic isolation, what is different now is that Israel has severely dented Iran's deterrent strategy embedded in asymmetric warfare through its proxies, Hizballah, Hamas and, more recently, Bashar Al-Assad's forces in Syria. Worse, Israel's successful assassination of Hamas' Haniyeh during Pezeshkian's inauguration in Tehran sends a chilling message to Iranian authorities that nowhere is safe, equally raising doubts about Iran's own security capabilities. With its knives blunted, and a hawkish Trump administration in place again, Tehran's diplomacy is now conducted from a position of *weakness*, and

²⁵ France 24, "Arab, Muslim Leaders Slam Israel, but Differ on Response", 11 November 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231111-gaza-in-spotlight-as-arab-muslim-blocs-meet-in-saudi>.

²⁶ TRT World, "No Punitive Measures against Israel in Arab League Declaration", 16 May 2024, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/no-punitive-measures-against-israel-in-arab-league-declaration-18163434>.

engagement with its Arab neighbours has become a *necessity* for a pragmatic Iran to prevent escalation.

“A weakened Iran, with two damaged guns in Hamas and Hizballah, clearly wants to avoid escalation and needs improved ties with its Gulf Arab neighbours to help it break out of diplomatic isolation.”

At a news conference on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly’s summit last September, Pezeshkian declared that Iran was “willing to put all our weapons aside so long as Israel is willing to do the same”.²⁷ Although a backlash by hardline media at home forced his foreign minister to resort to damage control, claiming that that the president “never made such a statement”,²⁸ a weakened Iran, with two damaged guns in Hamas and Hizballah, clearly wants to avoid escalation and needs improved ties with its Gulf Arab neighbours to help it break out of diplomatic isolation. The Iranian president has also not been shy to admit that he is open to renegotiating the JCPOA in return for sanctions relief,²⁹ with his vice-president, Javad Zarif, reiterating the desire to revive the accord with a “rational” Trump.³⁰

The Iranian regime will now have to contend with a new president in the Oval Office, who will seek to isolate and further weaken

²⁷ Augusta Saraiva and Arsalan Shahla, “Iran’s President Says He’s Prepared to Ease Tensions with Israel”, *Bloomberg*, 23 September 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-09-23/iran-s-president-says-he-s-prepared-to-ease-tensions-with-israel>.

²⁸ Amwaj Media, “Deep Dive: Talk Of ‘Laying down Arms’ Lands Pezeshkian in Trouble in Tehran”, 26 September 2024, <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/deep-dive-talk-of-laying-down-arms-lands-pezeskian-in-trouble-in-tehran>.

²⁹ Arms Control Association, “Iranian President Opens Door to New Nuclear Talks”, October 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-10/news/iranian-president-opens-door-new-nuclear-talks>.

³⁰ *TRT World*, “Iran Eyes ‘Trump 2’ Nuclear Deal, Says Oct 7 Attack Hit Talks with US”, 23 January 2025, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/iran-eyes-trump-2-nuclear-deal-says-oct-7-attack-hit-talks-with-us-18256844>.

it. In this regard, Iran can harbour some optimism that diplomacy with the Gulf Arab states, home to US bases and with various partner/ally designations by Washington, can serve as an alternative channel of communication with the next US administration.

The Outlier

It is worth singling out Qatar-Iran relations amid the climate of détente elsewhere in the Gulf. Doha's foreign policy since the 1990s involves maximising its partners and minimising its adversaries. Mehran Kamrava, professor of government at Georgetown University-Qatar, writes that the small state's strategy is entrenched in hedging, "placing one big bet one way, as in security alliances and partnerships, and a number of small bets the opposite way, as in maintaining diplomatic and ostensibly 'friendly' relations".³¹ Qatari diplomats have told the author that dialogue and nation branding³² constitute important components of the country's diplomacy and quest for soft power.

Accordingly, in dealing with Iran, with which it shares the world's largest gas field – the South Pars/North Dome field – and now, a joint pursuit of the world's longest undersea tunnel,³³ Qatar has consistently sought to avoid antagonising the Islamic republic. From Doha's perspective, Iran acts as a useful counterweight to Saudi Arabia and the United States, while the GCC as a collective organisation "affords Qatar the diplomatic protection it needs to adopt policies that

³¹ Mehran Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar relations", in *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab neighbours*, eds. Gawdar Bahgat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Neil Quilliam (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 168–169.

³² In a journal article co-authored by the head of the Diplomatic Institute, Ambassador Abdulaziz Al-Horr, it is argued that Qatar has developed "nested power" that goes further than soft power such that Doha aims to "project itself as a promoter of peace, security, and prosperity", particularly in the post-blockade years. See Abdulaziz Al-Horr, M. Evren Tok, and Tekla Gagoshidze, "Rethinking Soft Power in the Post-Blockade Times: The Case of Qatar", *Digest of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): pp. 329–350.

³³ Islamic Republic News Agency, "Iran, Qatar Pursue Plans for World's Longest Undersea Tunnel", 9 November 2024, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85654379/Iran-Qatar-pursue-plans-for-world-s-longest-undersea-tunnel>.

run counter to Iranian interests and displease Tehran”.³⁴ Although Qatar recalled its ambassador from Iran in 2016 to show support for the Saudis, whose consulate in Mashhad had been attacked by Iranian protesters, Doha’s hedging policy paid off: about a year later when the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt launched a blockade against Qatar, Iran sent five planeloads of food to Doha.³⁵ The two countries restored full diplomatic relations soon thereafter.

“Mediation – a tool in Qatar’s soft power inventory³⁶ – is now becoming increasingly burdensome owing to its ongoing role as chief broker in the ceasefire negotiations between Hamas and Israel.”

But the ongoing regional rapprochement, entwined with conflict and a new president in the White House, complicates Qatar’s foreign policy agenda. Specifically, mediation – a tool in Qatar’s soft power inventory³⁷ – is now becoming increasingly burdensome owing to its ongoing role as chief broker in the ceasefire negotiations between Hamas and Israel. In the immediate months after the 7 October attacks, Doha was on the defensive when US Senator Mike Lee tweeted that “Qatar has blood on its hands. ... President Biden should demand that Qatar arrest

³⁴ Mehran Kamrava, “Iran-Qatar relations”, p. 168.

³⁵ *The New Arab*, “Iran Sends 90 Tonnes of Food to Qatar amid an Escalating Diplomatic Dispute”, 11 June 2017, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iran-sends-five-planes-food-isolated-qatar>.

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of Qatari mediation, including successes in conflict zones such as Sudan, Chad and Afghanistan, see Sansom Milton, Ghassan Elkahoulout, and Sana Tariq, “Qatar’s EVOLVING Role in Conflict Mediation”, *Mediterranean Politics* 30, no. 1 (2025): pp. 53–77.

³⁷ For a detailed analysis of Qatari mediation, including successes in conflict zones such as Sudan, Chad and Afghanistan, see Sansom Milton, Ghassan Elkahoulout, and Sana Tariq, “Qatar’s EVOLVING Role in Conflict Mediation”, *Mediterranean Politics* 30, no. 1 (2025): pp. 53–77.

Hamas leaders and seize their assets.”³⁸ Doha has provided millions of dollars in funding to Gaza and, by extension, Hamas since 2014³⁹ – with the tacit approval of Israel, the United States and the Palestinian Authority – and gives the group’s leaders refuge on its soil. Its detractors

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have used this to accuse Doha of financing radical groups, compelling Qatari officials to clarify their position time and again.⁴⁰ Qatar will have to reconsider its long-term investment in Hamas in a calculus involving the foreign policy direction set by a new US president, who is likely to have different expectations of Qatar’s status as a major non-Nato ally since January 2022. Doha will need no reminder of Trump’s early

³⁸ Mohamed Altayeb, “Qatar Ambassador Hits Back at US Senator over Claims that Doha Has ‘Blood on Its Hands’”, *Doha News*, 27 November 2023, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-ambassador-hits-back-at-us-senator-over-claims-that-doha-has-blood-on-its-hands/>.

³⁹ Reuters, “Palestinian Authority Withdraws from Qatar Funding Scheme for Gaza – Qatari Envoy”, 11 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pa-withdraws-qatar-funding-scheme-gaza-qatari-envoy-says-2021-09-10/>. Last September, Doha also pledged US\$100 million in humanitarian aid to Gaza, including support to the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA). See Middle East Monitor, “Qatar Pledges \$100 Million in Aid for Gaza Humanitarian Crisis”, 28 September 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240928-qatar-pledges-100-million-in-aid-for-gaza-humanitarian-crisis/>.

⁴⁰ According to an investigative report by CNN, Qatar started monthly payments to the Gaza Strip in 2018, delivering US\$15 million worth of cash in suitcases through Israeli territory. Washington was aware of such movement and the Israelis believed that such a plan would continue to divide Palestinian factions. See Nima Elbagir et al., “Qatar Sent Millions to Gaza for Years – with Israel’s Backing. Here’s What We Know about the Controversial Deal”, CNN, 12 December 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/11/middleeast/qatar-hamas-funds-israel-backing-intl/index.html>.

support for the regional blockade against Qatar in 2017, before changing tune in early 2018.

Additionally, the latest breakthrough in ceasefire talks, coming after a period of inactivity, was achieved only with Washington's intervening hand⁴¹ – a worrying sign of the ineffectiveness of Qatari mediation. Tit-for-tat attacks between Israel and Iran over the course of 2024, with the former a party to ceasefire talks and the latter at the heart of its Axis of Resistance involving Hamas, also affected Qatari mediation.

Furthermore, the ongoing regional climate of rapprochement may call into question any Qatari intermediary role in US-Iran relations. Although Doha is known to have helped to facilitate Washington's efforts in 2023 to release five American prisoners held in Iran,⁴² the United States may in future be able to avail itself of the communication channels that neighbouring Gulf states now have established with Tehran.⁴³

Taking Regional Ownership in a Trump World

The Gulf détente with Tehran shows no sign of rupture thus far even though the nature and extent of diplomacy may vary in specific bilateral

⁴¹ The recent agreement constitutes a culmination of efforts by *both* the Biden and Trump camps, with the latter's new Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, credited with getting the deal over the line. "I think they heard him [Trump] loud and clear: better get it done by the inaugural", Witkoff told reporters. See Alice Speri, "Who Is Steve Witkoff, Trump's Man at the Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Talks?", Al Jazeera, 18 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/18/who-is-steve-witkoff-trumps-man-at-the-gaza-ceasefire-talks>.

⁴² David Gritten, "US Releases \$6bn in Frozen Iran Funds for Prisoner Swap", BBC, 12 September 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66784817>.

⁴³ Oman, for example, previously helped with the US-Iran prisoner swap deal with clandestine meetings in Tehran. See *Middle East Eye*, "Iranian Press Review: Oman Held Secret Meetings in Tehran on US Prisoner Exchange", 21 July 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/oman-secret-meetings-iran-us-prisoner-swap-talks-press-review>. Earlier, the sultanate also mediated a prisoner swap between Iran and Belgium in May 2023.

relations. While the Gulf Arab states have no wish to fall within Iran's (or its proxies') crosshairs, they are equally wary about Israel's increasingly unchecked military power and will not accept Tel Aviv imposing its will on the region. As the wars in Gaza and Lebanon remain inconclusive, a likely future wave of radicalisation from the remnants of disillusioned Arab groups will be a cause for concern. In this regard, continued engagement with Iran, such as through the sharing of intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation, could serve as a form of insurance for the Gulf Arab states.

“With Trump 2.0 in office for the next four years, both the Gulf Arabs and Iran will have to navigate unpredictable waters.”

In conclusion, with Trump 2.0 in office for the next four years, both the Gulf Arabs and Iran will have to navigate unpredictable waters. For the former, leaving a communication channel with Tehran open would fit into Trump's demands of burden-sharing and constitute a means of showing their utility. Riyadh has wasted no time in presenting itself as a hub of Trump's Middle East diplomacy: not only was the Saudi crown prince the first foreign leader to receive a call from the US president, the kingdom is now also the venue of US-Russia talks on Ukraine and has offered to mediate between Washington and Iran on a new nuclear deal.⁴⁴ But a clash between the United States and the Gulf Arabs could arise with a renewed maximum pressure campaign against Iran, particularly since the Gulf Arab governments have invested significantly in a diplomacy-for-stability approach with Tehran. For Iran,

⁴⁴ Garrett Haake and Rebecca Shabad, “Trump Speaks to Saudi Crown Prince in First Foreign Leader Call of Second Term”, NBC News, 24 January 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-speaks-saudi-crown-prince-first-foreign-leader-call-second-term-rcna188940>. See also Abbas Al Lawati, “Saudi Arabia Seeks to Mediate between Trump and Iran on New Nuclear Deal”, CNN, 16 February 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/16/middleeast/saudi-arabia-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-intl/index.html>.

increased pressure from the United States would force it to revisit the option of a nuclear weapon even at the risk of alienating its Gulf neighbours. Gulf Arab and Iranian leaders alike will pander to Trump's transactional instincts – and, indeed, to his personalised approach in politics. Regardless, the premiums issued by a Trump administration will be expectedly high for both sides.

What is key is maintaining the US security umbrella in the region, which, despite previous reports of downsizing or rightsizing,⁴⁵ has withstood the test of time. As Chavesco “Chevy” Cook, an active-duty lieutenant general serving on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon, writes, America's role in the Middle East requires a “flexible and scalable approach” that, while puzzling, shows “strategic persistence” in response to “short-term threats and the longer-term goal of recalibrating its military posture for future challenges.”⁴⁶ Across the Gulf, the slightest perception of an American retreat will trigger region-wide anxiety, as this paper has outlined. Hence, taking regional ownership in an uncertain geopolitical climate remains the most viable path forward. ♦

* **Dr Clemens Chay** is Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. His research focuses on the geopolitical and domestic affairs of the Gulf Arab states.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Becca Wasser and Elisa Catalano Ewers, “Rightsizing in the Middle East”, Center for a New American Security, 16 December 2021,

<https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/rightsizing-in-the-middle-east>.

⁴⁶ Chavesco “Chevy” Cook, “America's Middle East Force Posture Requires Fluidity of Options”, *Breaking Defense*, 10 January 2025,

<https://breakingdefense.com/2025/01/americas-middle-east-force-posture-requires-fluidity-of-options/>. Trump's foreign policy vision is also reflected in a “peace through strength” strategy. See Andrew Chakhoyan, “Trump Pledges Peace through Strength. Will He Deliver?”, *Politico*, 9 December 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-peace-russia-ukraine-war-georgia-politics-foreign-policy-crisis/>.



29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Block B #06-06
Singapore 119620
Tel: +65 6516 2380; Fax: +65 6774 0458
Email: contact.mei@nus.edu.sg
www.mei.nus.edu.sg

