



## **Iranian Strategy in the Arabian Gulf: From Geopolitical Expansion to Reshaping the Regional Security Complex.**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Arabian Gulf region has experienced major strategic shifts since the British Labour Government announced in 1968 its decision to withdraw from the area. This move gave the United States an opportunity to introduce the "Nixon Doctrine," which relied on the so-called "twin pillars" – Iran and Saudi Arabia – as a foundation for maintaining regional stability and securing oil supplies. However, this approach quickly collapsed following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which created a strategic vacuum in the region and set in*

*motion a series of profound geopolitical changes. These included the erosion of the bilateral balance of power, the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, as well as the growing momentum of Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Taken together, these developments highlight the need to reconsider traditional theoretical frameworks in order to better understand the evolving security dynamics of the region, especially in light of the rising influence of non-traditional regional actors and the increasing complexity of cross-border challenges.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, nuclear dossier, regional security, strategic balance.*

## **La stratégie iranienne dans le golfe Persique : de l'expansion géopolitique à la refonte du complexe sécuritaire régional.**

### **Résumé :**

*La région du golfe Persique a connu des changements stratégiques majeurs depuis que le gouvernement travailliste britannique a annoncé en 1968 sa décision de se retirer de la région. Cette décision a donné aux États-Unis l'occasion d'introduire la « doctrine Nixon », qui s'appuyait sur les deux piliers que sont l'Iran et l'Arabie saoudite pour maintenir la stabilité régionale et garantir l'approvisionnement en pétrole. Cependant, cette approche s'est rapidement effondrée à la suite de la révolution islamique de 1979 en Iran, qui a créé un vide stratégique dans la région et déclenché une série de profonds changements géopolitiques. Parmi ceux-ci figuraient l'érosion de l'équilibre bilatéral des pouvoirs, le déclenchement de la guerre Iran-Irak, l'invasion du Koweït par l'Irak, la création du Conseil de coopération du Golfe (CCG) et l'invasion de l'Irak par les États-Unis en 2003, ainsi que la dynamique croissante des ambitions nucléaires de l'Iran. Dans leur ensemble, ces développements soulignent la nécessité de reconsidérer les cadres théoriques traditionnels afin de mieux comprendre l'évolution de la dynamique sécuritaire de la région, en particulier à la lumière de l'influence croissante des acteurs régionaux non traditionnels et de la complexité croissante des défis transfrontaliers.*

**Mots clés :** *Iran, dossier nucléaire, sécurité régionale, équilibre stratégique.*



## **Introduction:**

The Arabian Gulf constitutes one of the most sensitive regions in the contemporary international system, due to its profound geostrategic and economic significance. This has made it an open arena for regional and international power competition, as well as shifting dynamics of influence and security arrangements. Within this context, the Islamic Republic of Iran emerges as a central regional actor seeking to reshape the balance of power across the Gulf space through a combination of hard and soft power instruments and a strategy rooted in geopolitical expansion and ideological framing.

Iran's policy toward the Gulf has undergone significant transformations, the first of which dates back to 1968 when the British Labour Government announced its decision to withdraw from the Arabian Gulf. This prompted the United States to adopt what later became known as the "Nixon Doctrine," built on the so-called "twin-pillar" strategy – Iran and Saudi Arabia – as a means of ensuring stability and safeguarding Western interests, particularly with regard to the continued flow of oil. However, this strategic equation rapidly collapsed following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which fundamentally altered the prevailing balance and produced a strategic vacuum that paved the way for new forms of regional rivalry.

**Among the most significant developments accompanying this shift were:**

- the collapse of the "twin-pillar" policy;

- the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988);
- Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990;
- the Gulf–U.S. disagreement over the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq;
- the emergence of the Gulf Cooperation Council as a sub-regional system; and
- the growing regional tension surrounding Iran’s nuclear program.

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***Research Problem:***

In light of these overlapping dynamics, this study addresses the following central question:

**What is Iran’s conception of regional security in the Arabian Gulf, what are its main strategic determinants, and what impact does it have on the balance of the regional security system?**

*From this overarching problem arise several subsidiary questions, including:*

- How has Iran’s policy toward the Gulf evolved over time?
- What is the relationship between Iran’s nuclear ambitions and regional stability?
- How do the Gulf states respond to this conception, and what are their corresponding security strategies?

***Hypotheses:***

This study is based on the following hypotheses:

- Iran seeks to consolidate its position as a dominant regional power in the Gulf.



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- Iran aims to shape an alternative security order grounded in regional sovereignty and the exclusion of Western dominance.
- Iran constitutes a structural source of threat to collective Gulf security due to its expansionist and security-driven policies.

### ***Significance of the Study:***

This study derives its significance from several considerations:

- ✓ **Academically:** it fills a research gap in security studies by linking state behaviour with ideological discourse in the Gulf region.
- ✓ **Practically:** it offers analytical tools for understanding the challenges of regional security and for assessing the available options for either confronting or engaging with Iran.
- ✓ **Theoretically:** it combines multiple explanatory approaches in order to provide a more integrated framework for understanding Iran's conception of security.

### ***Theoretical Framework:***

- This study draws on three main approaches:
- **The realistic approach:** which is employed to analyze the behavior of the Iranian state in terms of national interest and the pursuit of power;
- **The critical structural approach:** which is used to explore how Iran's ideological identity shapes its security practices;

- -The Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Wæver), which provides a lens for examining the interaction among units within the Gulf environment as an interconnected security network.

### *Methodology:*

Methodologically, the study employs the following tools:

- **The historical-analytical approach:** in order to trace the evolution of Iran's policy toward the Gulf across different time periods;
- **The structural-functional approach:** to examine the roles of regional actors and institutions in shaping the security system;
- **-Discourse and textual analysis:** to decode Iran's security conception as reflected in political speeches and official documents.

### *Structure of the Study:*

The study is divided into three main sections:

- **Section One :The historical trajectory of Iran's policy toward the Gulf: from the Shah to the Islamic Republic:**This chronological analysis traces the evolution of Iranian-Gulf relations from the era of the Shah, through the 1979 Revolution, and up to the major strategic transformations of the post-Cold War period.
- **Section Two: Iran's nuclear program as an instrument of regional dominance: drivers, dimensions, and security implications:**This section examines Iran's nuclear ambitions from a strategic perspective, with particular emphasis on Tehran's



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regional objectives and its interaction with both regional and international powers.

- **Section Three :Iran’s strategic role in shaping the architecture of Gulf regional security: between agency and challenge:** This section analyzes the extent to which Iran’s role affects the balance of power in the Gulf region, and assesses Iran’s position in reshaping the regional security order in the context of regional and international competition.

## 1. The Historical Trajectory of Iran’s Policy toward the Gulf – from the Shah to the Islamic Republic:

Iran’s policy toward the Arabian Gulf is the product of a long history of geopolitical interaction and political competition. The Gulf has consistently constituted a vital sphere of Iranian influence, from ancient times and the Islamic Persian empires to the Pahlavi era, during which Iran was consolidated as a regional power entrusted – with Western support – with the security of the Gulf. The 1979 Islamic Revolution did not overturn this regional paradigm entirely; rather, it rearticulated Iran’s regional ambitions within a new ideological framework based on the principle of “exporting the revolution,” which represented a direct threat to the conservative Gulf monarchies.

This section seeks to analyze the major transformations in Iran’s policy toward the Gulf, from the Shah’s period to the Islamic Republic, by identifying the constants and variables in Iran’s perception of the Gulf as a historical and strategic sphere of influence. The analysis is based on a critical historical reading that aims to explain Iran’s behaviour in

light of the continuity of national and imperial ambitions, regardless of the governing regime.

### **1.1. A Historical Reading of Iran's Gulf Policy from Antiquity to the Pre-Revolutionary Era:**

Iran's policy toward the Gulf has historically been shaped by a set of structural and contextual factors, which have produced different approaches across successive historical periods. Although the nature of Iran's orientation toward the Gulf has varied over time, these changes have not eliminated the presence of enduring constants in its regional outlook. Despite the profound historical, political, economic, and military developments that have taken place in the Gulf, Iran has consistently viewed the region as a natural and strategic extension of its influence.

Although it is difficult to draw precise historical boundaries for the development of Iran's policy toward the Gulf, it is nonetheless clear that the **1979** Islamic Revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, marked a decisive turning point in Iran's foreign policy more broadly. By virtue of its geographic proximity, Iran has long maintained deep-rooted ties with the Arabian Gulf region; indeed, the Gulf has always constituted a vital sphere of influence for Persian imperial policy throughout distant historical eras. Geography has played a central role in shaping the relationship between the Iranian plateau and both Mesopotamia and the Gulf region, which overlooks that plateau. The various states that emerged on the Iranian plateau frequently invaded the fertile plains of Mesopotamia and the Arab littoral of the Gulf more generally – as evidenced by the actions of the Canaanites, Persians, and



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Sassanids before Islam, and later the Buyids, Seljuks, Mongols, and Safavids after the advent of Islam<sup>1</sup>.

The Arabian Gulf has played a distinctive role since the dawn of human civilization, serving as a principal trade corridor and a key transportation route in the ancient world. Consequently, Persian attention was directed from an early stage toward gaining control over the region. This objective was realized when Babylon fell to the Achaemenid Persians in 538 BC, paving the way for sustained Persian dominance over the area until the fall of the Persian Empire at the hands of Alexander the Great.

With the advent of Islam in territories where Zoroastrianism had been the dominant faith, the new religion gradually began to spread throughout the urban centers and soon expanded into the rural areas. This ushered in a period of religious unification encompassing both the Gulf region—where the Islamic message originated—and the lands of Persia, which also embraced the new faith. As a result, the region came to be unified under the banner of Islam.

The Persians gradually began to assert a degree of independence from the Islamic caliphate, as reflected in the succession of the Tahirid, Samanid, and Saffarid emirates in Iran. This trend culminated in the establishment of the Buyid dynasty (334–447 AH), which marked the first effective restoration of Persian control over political authority in Iran

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<sup>1</sup>-Abdul Aziz Al-Douri, "The Historical Relations between Arabs and Iranians", paper presented to the symposium \*\*Contemporary Arab-Iranian Relations and Future Prospects: Research and Discussions of the Intellectual Seminar Organized by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Cooperation with Qatar University\*\*, Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1996, p. 45.

since the Islamic conquest. Moreover, the Buyid rulers succeeded in occupying parts of the eastern Arabian Peninsula, wresting them from the Qarmatians, before these areas were eventually reclaimed.

The Buyids were followed by the Ghaznavid dynasty (566–581 AH), then the Seljuks (629–640 AH), until their decline under the Mongol invasions. This was succeeded by the Ilkhanid state (654–754 AH) and later the Timurid dynasty (771–912 AH). The Safavids subsequently rebuilt the Iranian state in 1501, asserting its independence from the Ottoman Caliphate and initiating a new phase of Iranian expansionist policies toward the Gulf region – particularly during the early years of Nader Shah’s reign (1732–1747), who succeeded in establishing a powerful Iranian naval force<sup>2</sup>.

Then Karim Khan (1757–1779) continued Persia's expansionist policy in the Arabian Gulf, along both its eastern and western coasts.

From a strategic, regional, and international perspective, Iraq has long represented the gateway through which the Persians could reach the shores of the Mediterranean, as well as the land route—via Basra and Al-Ahsa—leading toward Oman and the Gulf states, thereby enabling the Gulf to become, in effect, a Persian lake. This was particularly significant given that a considerable segment of the Gulf’s population adheres to the Shiite doctrine, making them potential instruments that could be employed by Persia to advance its ambitions of dominating the Arabian Peninsula and establishing a broader Shiite state capable of rivaling the two major Islamic powers of the time: the Sunni Ottoman

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<sup>2</sup>-Abdul Aziz Al-Douri, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–56.



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Empire in Anatolia and the Balkans, and the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, the Levant, and the Hijaz<sup>3</sup>.

Accordingly, conflict between Persia and the Ottoman Empire intensified amid Arab–Persian rivalry and intra-Arab divisions—particularly between the Al-Saud and the Al-Bu Sa’id dynasties—alongside the regional policy of Ottoman control over the Gulf, all of which paved the way for external powers seeking to penetrate the region<sup>4</sup>.

Britain soon emerged as the dominant naval power, and the British fleet came to exert decisive influence in the region. While the Sultan of Muscat entered into an alliance with France, Britain concluded a cooperation agreement with Persia in **1801** and began to pursue a policy aimed at preserving Persian sovereignty over the eastern coast of the Gulf. Consequently, the Arab presence on the Persian shore gradually disappeared from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward.

Accordingly, Persia protested Britain’s seizure of the Arab territories in the Gulf and the imposition of the **1820** Treaty of Protection, particularly since Bahrain had become subject to that agreement. Nevertheless, Persia’s fear of British power posed a major obstacle to the use of force in its attempts to take control of Bahrain<sup>5</sup>.

Iran continued to view the Gulf as an Iranian lake; however, the sustained British presence and the emergence

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<sup>3</sup>- Gamal Zakaria Qassem and Younan Labib Rizq (eds.), **Arab–Iranian Relations**, Cairo: League of Arab States, Institute of Arab Research and Studies, 1993, pp. 50–51.

<sup>4</sup>- Gamal Zakaria Qassem and Younan Labib Rizq, **op. cit.**, pp. 55–62.

<sup>5</sup>- John Gordon Lorimer, **Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf (Arabic translation, Translation Office – Ruler’s Court of Qatar)**, vol. 1, Beirut: Dar Al-Arabia, 1967–1970, pp. 267–268.

of the Saudi state in **1932** acted as two key factors in curbing Iran's ambitions in the region.

Iran had raised the issue of Bahrain's allegiance to it before the League of Nations in **1927**; however, the League was unable to reach a decision on the matter due to Britain's rejection of the Iranian claims. These assertions were subsequently suspended during the Second World War, as Britain's control over the Gulf was reinforced for wartime necessities<sup>6</sup>.

The return of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power in **1953**—facilitated by an active role played by the United States—marked the beginning of a close alignment between Iran and American strategic plans in the Middle East and the Arab region. Iran subsequently joined the Baghdad Pact in **1955** and recognized the State of Israel in **1961**.

In **1964**, Iran occupied Abu Musa Island, and in the aftermath of the Arab defeat in the **1967** war, Iranian forces proceeded to occupy Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb.

In **1968**, Iran renewed its claim over Bahrain, but the issue was eventually settled on the basis of accepting the will of the Bahraini people, who chose independence in a public referendum. In the late **1970**, the Shah also deployed Iranian forces to help suppress the Dhofar Rebellion in the Sultanate of Oman. In this way, Iran under the Shah came to exercise considerable influence throughout the Gulf region and became a source of apprehension for the Gulf states, particularly as it had been transformed—through American support—into a major regional power.

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<sup>6</sup>- Ahmad Mahmoud Sayyih, **Bahrain and the Iranian Claim**, edited and reviewed by Mahmoud Ali Al-Dawood, Kafr Al-Dawwar: 'Araf Alexandria Press, 1963, pp. 165–166.



## 1.2. The Shah as the Gulf Policeman:

Western documents leave little doubt that, under the presidency of Richard Nixon, the United States viewed the British withdrawal from the Gulf in the early 1970s as creating a security vacuum. This led President Nixon to provide the Shah of Iran with large quantities of advanced weaponry and to assign him the role of “guardian of Gulf security” in line with Western interests. The Shah effectively played this role during the period between 1970 and 1979. This mandate reflected the essence of the Nixon Strategy; nevertheless, Iran under the Shah remained the dominant power in the region, largely due to the weakness of the Saudi regime and its inability to assume a leadership role in the Gulf<sup>7</sup>.

During the 1970s, the Shah of Iran received more than \$14 billion worth of American weaponry, some of which was used to support Omani forces in their war against the Dhofar Rebellion.

The Shah was not only acting as the “policeman” of the Gulf, but also maintained a close alliance with Israel. From Iran’s perspective, it shared with Israel a number of common objectives—most notably opposing both communism and Arab nationalism, particularly during the Nasserist era. Iran viewed the Israeli presence as a means of absorbing and weakening Arab capabilities, while also considering Israel as a bridge for maintaining strong ties with the West, especially with Washington.

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<sup>7</sup>- Michael t. it are, rising powers, shrinking powrs: the new geopolics of energy (New York: metropolitan books,2008) p185.

One example of this Iranian–Israeli cooperation was the exchange of visits between their respective prime ministers, including David Ben-Gurion’s secret visit to Iran in **1956**. Following the Suez Crisis of **1956**, Iran also financed the construction of a pipeline connecting the port of Eilat in southern Israel, passing through Beersheba and reaching the Mediterranean Sea, in order to transport Iranian oil to Israel<sup>8</sup>.

Another manifestation of this cooperation was the training provided by the Israeli army to the Iranian security apparatus at the time, known as SAVAK, in the use of advanced interrogation and torture techniques, as well as the training of Iranian military pilots, agricultural engineers, and other forms of technical and security cooperation.

### **1.3. The Iranian Revolution and the Strategic Vacuum:**

By late **1978**, Iran was experiencing acute internal conflicts between the forces of the ruling regime on the one hand, and various religious, political, and popular opposition groups on the other. These tensions plunged the Pahlavi regime into a severe crisis, fueled by deteriorating domestic conditions and problematic foreign relations, which were characterized by: a corrupt political authority, the absence of political participation, full dependency on the United States, a growing detachment from religion, and widespread administrative corruption. These circumstances generated widespread discontent and ultimately led to the revolution that overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in February **1979**. This event opened a security breach in the Arabian Gulf and reintroduced the issue of a strategic vacuum

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<sup>8</sup>- Truta Parsi, *tracheroas alliana*, **the secret dealings of Israel –Iran and the US New Haven**, CT: Yale university press2007, p21



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following the shift in Iran's domestic policy. The situation was further compounded by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Iran's neighbor and a Gulf-adjacent state, which once again drew the region into the arena of international power rivalry<sup>9</sup>.

On the Arab side, the Gulf states did not align themselves with either party amid the internal events unfolding in Iran<sup>10</sup>.

With the victory of the revolution, the new regime sought to formulate a new domestic strategy based on two main pillars:

- ✓ the systematic elimination of internal enemies of the regime; and
- ✓ the establishment of a religious state anchored in revolutionary institutions.

The fundamentalists, who drew their support from the religious establishment and from the lower and middle classes, succeeded in prevailing over the nationalists and assumed power following the resignation of Bazargan in protest over the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the detention of hostages in November 1979.

Iran's policy toward the Gulf did not differ significantly from that of the Shah's era. Relations between Iran and Iraq rapidly deteriorated, leading to renewed disputes over the Shatt al-Arab and ultimately to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq

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<sup>9</sup>- Yahya Helmi Rajab\*\*, \*Gulf Security in Light of Regional and Global Changes\*, vol. 1, Cairo: Al-Mahrousa Center for Research, Training, and Publishing, 1997, pp. 77-78.

<sup>10</sup>- "The Iranian Crisis and Its International Repercussions," **International Politics\***, no. 55 (January 1979), p. 6.

War, which cast its shadows and posed serious threats to the security and stability of the Gulf region.

At the same time, the Gulf states' hopes for a new era in Iran were soon disappointed, as the Islamic Republic quickly proclaimed the principle of exporting the Islamic revolution to the Gulf countries and began voicing its ambition to revive Persian glory. Ayatollah Khomeini declared a new policy, asserting that the Gulf was an Iranian sphere of influence, that Islam was incompatible with the monarchical systems prevailing in the Gulf states, that Bahrain was an integral part of Iran, and openly expressed his support for the Shiites of Iraq.

With the fall of the Shah's regime, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states lost an important element of their internal stability and a key pillar of the regional balance of power in the Gulf. Their losses were further compounded by the emergence of a new regime that posed a serious threat to the legitimacy of their ruling systems — systems that are fundamentally hereditary, conservative, and closely linked to the West in political, economic, and military terms<sup>11</sup>.

The fundamental concern for Iran's neighbors was that Tehran's approach reflected Iranian national interests and a desire to consolidate the power of the Iranian state.

In addition to these political confrontations with the Gulf states, the revolution also began mobilizing Shiite minorities to threaten their stability. It pursued a policy of exporting the "Islamic Revolution" and actively sought to undermine and overturn the ruling systems in the Gulf countries.

This internal Iranian shift also led to the outbreak of a violent war with Iraq. The conflict represented a fierce

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<sup>11</sup>- Abdel-Khalek Abdullah, "Tensions in the Gulf Regional System," *International Politics*, no. 132 (April 1998), p. 29.



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struggle for regional hegemony between two powers vying to assert themselves as the dominant regional force. The war was not confined to the Iranian and Iraqi fronts; rather, it became a conflict that engulfed the entire Gulf regional system.

**Summary:** The historical trajectory of Iranian policy toward the Arabian Gulf reveals a persistent duality between geopolitical constants and ideological variables. Iran, whether during the Shah's reign or after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, has never abandoned its view of the Gulf as a natural sphere of influence. What has differed, however, are the instruments used to assert this ambition: the imperial leveraging of international alliances during the Shah's era, and the deployment of ideological and sectarian dimensions following the revolution.

The analysis demonstrates that the turning point represented by the Islamic Revolution of **1979** did not constitute a complete break with the past, but rather a reconfiguration of deeply rooted Iranian national ambitions. Throughout history, Iran's foreign policy has been oriented toward establishing a form of regional hegemony, grounded in its geographic position, imperial legacy, military capabilities, and at times, sectarian instruments. Consequently, understanding the contemporary regional context is incomplete without examining this historical continuum, which forms the structural backdrop of Iran's current behavior.

Accordingly, this section lays the foundation for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflict in the Gulf and highlights the necessity of approaching Iran as a political actor driven by considerations that extend beyond the

immediate political moment, connecting instead to a civilizational-strategic perspective aimed at redefining the balance of power in the Gulf and the broader region.

## **2. The Iranian Nuclear Program as a Tool of Regional Hegemony - Motivations, Dimensions, and Security Implications.**

Since its inception, the Iranian nuclear program has represented one of the most complex security issues in the Gulf, given its entanglement with geopolitical ambitions, ideological narratives, and deterrence balances within an extremely sensitive strategic environment. From its launch under the Shah as part of the “Atoms for Peace” initiative, to its reconfiguration under the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian nuclear project has never been merely a technical endeavor or a matter of sovereign prerogative; rather, it embodies the ambition of a state seeking to impose a new balance of power in the region.

Tehran has leveraged this program to consolidate its presence as a major regional power, drawing on a complex set of motivations ranging from the need for deterrent security against regional adversaries to an ideological dimension that legitimizes a “resistant regime” viewing nuclear technology as a means to protect Islam against Western hegemony. The program has also evolved into a diplomatic bargaining tool and a lever of influence in the contexts of Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, making it a central instrument in the broader reconfiguration of regional security.

This section aims to analyze the Iranian nuclear program from a functional perspective, viewing it as a political and strategic instrument for redefining regional influence. It



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focuses on unpacking its intertwined motivations, elucidating its regional and international dimensions, and examining its security implications for the Gulf states through a critical lens that combines realist and geopolitical analysis. The objective is to understand the complex interplay between Iran's nuclear ambitions, Gulf apprehensions, and fluctuations in U.S. policy toward Tehran.

## **2.1. Iranian Nuclear Ambitions: From the Shah to the Islamic Republic:**

The Iranian nuclear program has undergone profound transformations since its inception in the 1950s under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, when it was launched as part of the "Atoms for Peace" initiative with American support. At the time, the program embodied Iran's ambition to emerge as a regional power on par with major states. The Shah articulated this vision in 1974, stating:

**"We are among those who do not possess nuclear weapons, and therefore friendship with a country like the United States is of vital importance."**<sup>12</sup>

However, this ambition did not cease with the Islamic Revolution of 1979; rather, it was reformulated within the revolutionary discourse, integrating an ideological vision aimed at consolidating the Islamic regime, promoting scientific independence, and asserting sovereignty in the face of "global arrogance"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>- Mark Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis : Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes* (London : IISS, 2006), 15.

<sup>13</sup>- Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis : A Memoir* (Washington, D.C. : Carnegie Endowment, 2012), 77.

The pace of the program accelerated in the 1990s, particularly during President Rafsanjani's tenure, evolving into a central element of Iran's strategic doctrine. This development was shaped by the threats posed during the Iran-Iraq War, including attacks on nuclear facilities and the use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces<sup>14</sup>.

## **2.2. The Intertwined Motivations of the Nuclear Program:**

The literature indicates that Iran does not operate from a single motivation but rather from a complex network of intertwined drivers:

**Economically:** To meet the growing domestic demand for energy and to provide a sustainable alternative to oil exports<sup>15</sup>.

**Scientifically and Technologically:** To develop a national scientific base that reflects civilizational progress and reinforces the principle of "scientific self-sufficiency"<sup>16</sup>.

**Security and Strategically:** To establish a deterrent capability within a hostile regional environment (Israel, the United States, and the Gulf states)<sup>17</sup>.

**Ideologically:** To consolidate the legitimacy of the "Resistant Islamic Regime," particularly through a discourse emphasizing the necessity of possessing power to protect Islam against the Israeli threat<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>- Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Developing Military Capabilities* (CSIS, 2005), 39–40.

<sup>15</sup>- Peter K. Kerr, *Iran's Nuclear Program : Status* (Congressional Research Service, 2021), 6–7.

<sup>16</sup>-Bowen and Moran, "Living with Nuclear Hedging," *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 687–707.

<sup>17</sup>-Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers : The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge : CUP, 2003), 382.

<sup>18</sup>- Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives* (London : I.B. Tauris, 2007), 109–110.



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In this context, Ayatollah Mohajerani was quoted at an Islamic conference in Tehran in 1992 as saying:

“As long as Israel continues to possess nuclear weapons, it is our duty as Muslims to cooperate in producing a nuclear bomb”<sup>19</sup>.

## 2.2. Regional and International Dimensions:

**Regionally:** The program constitutes a central source of concern for the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which perceive it as a dual threat: technological-military and ideological-sectarian<sup>20</sup>. This has accelerated the regional arms race, led to the signing of substantial military deals with the United States and France, and intensified intelligence cooperation<sup>21</sup>.

**Internationally:** The issue has triggered recurring diplomatic tensions, most notably the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in 2018<sup>22</sup>. It has also become a diplomatic bargaining tool for Iran in its engagements with the West and a leverage mechanism in regional conflicts, including those in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen<sup>23</sup>.

## 2.4. Regional Responses: The Dynamics of U.S.-Iranian Engagement:

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<sup>19</sup>- Ibid., 113.

<sup>20</sup>- Kenneth Katzman, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies* (CRS, 2020), 12–13.

<sup>21</sup>- Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States and Iran : Between Confrontation and Accommodation* (London : Routledge, 2016), 54.

<sup>22</sup>- Kelsey Davenport, *The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance* (Arms Control Association, 2021).

<sup>23</sup>- Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge : CUP, 2010), 223–224.

Gulf positions have been divided into:

- **-Hardline Camp:** Led by Saudi Arabia, which views any U.S.–Iran rapprochement as a threat to the regional balance of power<sup>24</sup>.
- **-Pragmatic Camp:** Represented by Oman and Qatar, which advocate dialogue with Iran and support a diplomacy of conciliation<sup>25</sup>.

The pragmatic camp operates on the premise that improving relations between Washington and Tehran could pave the way for a more balanced regional order, particularly if linked to comprehensive agreements covering Yemen, Iraq, and Syria<sup>26</sup>.

## **2.5. Implications of the Program for the Regional Security Architecture.**

-Undermining the Prospects for a Collective Security System: Due to eroded trust and lack of transparency<sup>27</sup>.

-Reshaping Gulf Defense Doctrines: Through the militarization of security policies and the expansion of foreign military bases<sup>28</sup>.

-Strengthening the Role of Non-State Actors: As the Revolutionary Guard is accused of supporting militias that act as Iranian proxies (Houthis, Hezbollah, etc...)<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup>- F. Gregory Gause III, “Saudi Arabia’s Regional Security Strategy,” Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper (2015).

<sup>25</sup>- Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar : Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2013), 98.

<sup>26</sup>- Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf* (New York : Columbia University Press, 2013), 140.

<sup>27</sup>- Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 388–390.

<sup>28</sup>- Cordesman, *Iran’s Developing Military Capabilities*, 75–76. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/irans-developing-military-capabilities-1>

<sup>29</sup>- Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 174–176.



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**Summary:** Tracing the trajectory of Iran’s nuclear program reveals that it extends beyond a mere technical project or a purely sovereign option, embodying a multifunctional strategic tool. Iran has utilized it to consolidate its position as a regional power counterbalancing its regional and international rivals. From its origins as a U.S.-backed “peaceful” initiative under the Shah, to its redefinition under the Islamic Republic within a radical ideological framework, the nuclear program has remained a sensitive benchmark for Tehran’s perception of its role in the regional and international order.

This nuclear dynamic has generated a series of profound security implications for the Gulf region, manifested in the escalation of deterrence logic, the erosion of collective security assumptions, the remilitarization of Gulf policies, and the growing role of non-state actors serving Iran’s strategic objectives. The program has also created a rift within the positions of the Gulf Cooperation Council states toward Iran, between those adopting a confrontational approach and those favoring pragmatism and cautious diplomacy.

In light of the above, it can be argued that Iran’s nuclear program has become a tool for redrawing regional power balances amid the erosion of U.S. hegemony and the intensification of strategic competition in the Middle East. Yet, while this tool grants Tehran significant negotiating leverage, it simultaneously deepens polarization, heightens security concerns among its Gulf neighbors, and complicates regional dialogue, rendering this issue one of the primary drivers of enduring instability in the region.

### **3. Iran's strategic role in shaping the architecture of Gulf regional security: between agency and challenge:**

Since the success of the Islamic Revolution and the consolidation of the Islamic system in Iran, Tehran has sought to assert itself as an active regional pole in the Arabian Gulf, and even as a guarantor of an alternative security order to the traditional Western arrangements. This role is grounded in a comprehensive security vision that views the Gulf as a natural extension of Iran's strategic depth, rather than merely a sphere of competition, rendering Iranian involvement in regional affairs a matter that transcends neighborhood concerns and becomes existential for Tehran<sup>30</sup>.

#### **3.1. From Political Influence to Security Positioning:**

Iran's repeated initiatives to propose alternative frameworks for Gulf security—such as the “Hormuz Peace Endeavor” (**HOPE**)—reflect attempts to reshape the regional rules of the game, based on the principle of “shared regional security,” which emphasizes the exclusion of foreign, particularly American, interventions from the security equation<sup>31</sup>.

Through this proposal, Iran seeks to establish a security model based on cooperation among Gulf states according to new principles, surpassing the traditional frameworks established by Washington decades ago—particularly in light of eroded trust between some Gulf capitals and the

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<sup>30</sup>- Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Mahjoob Zweiri. *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives : The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution*. London : I.B. Tauris, 2007.

<sup>31</sup>- Katz, Mark N. "Iran's HOPE for Persian Gulf Security." Middle East Institute, January 9, 2020. [Https : //www.mei.edu](https://www.mei.edu).



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United States following miscalculated interventions in Iraq and Syria.

### **3.2. Instruments of Iranian Influence in the Gulf Security Landscape:**

Iran employs a combination of strategic instruments to consolidate its presence in the security equation, which can be categorized as follows:

Asymmetric influence through the support of allied militias (such as the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hezbollah in Lebanon), which enables Iran to impose a new security reality through “proxy power”<sup>32</sup>.

Cyber and media penetration, employed as a means to undermine Gulf political narratives and propagate alternative visions of existing security arrangements<sup>33</sup>.

Diplomatic maneuvering, through repeated efforts to normalize bilateral relations (with Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman) on one hand, while leveraging tensions with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain on the other, to construct new political balances within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

### **2.3. Structural Challenges Facing Iran’s Role:**

Despite Iran’s persistent efforts, a set of structural challenges impede its project to establish an alternative security architecture in the Gulf:

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<sup>32</sup>- Wehrey, Frederic. *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf : From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2013.

<sup>33</sup>- Vakil, Sanam. "Iran and the Gulf States : Hedging, Engagement, and Competition." Chatham House Research Paper, August 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org>.

Ideological divide between Iran and its Arab neighbors, particularly given the sectarian dimension that Iranian regional policies adopt in certain issues<sup>34</sup>.

Collective Gulf rejection of Iranian hegemony, as most GCC states recognize that participating in Iran-led security arrangements could diminish their strategic maneuvering space, particularly given Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's strong ties with Washington.

Escalating regional competition with Turkey and Israel, which positions Tehran against multiple strategic adversaries within a single, resource-constrained, and multi-faceted geopolitical arena.

#### **2.4. Regional Balance Between Containment and Resistance:**

The Gulf policy toward Iran—particularly that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE—reflects a fluctuating dynamic between strategies of **containment** and **resistance**, underscoring the absence of a unified security vision within the Gulf Cooperation Council itself.

While Oman and Qatar adopt a cautiously open stance toward Tehran, Riyadh pursues a more hardline approach, albeit one that has shown some oscillation in recent years—particularly following the Saudi-Iranian agreement brokered by China in March 2023, which opened the door to partial settlements that remain incomplete<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>- Gause, F. Gregory III. *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>35</sup>- Fulton, Jonathan. "The China-Brokered Iran-Saudi Deal : Strategic Implications." *Atlantic Council*, March 13, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>.



## 2.5. The Future of Iran's Role in Gulf Security: Potential Scenarios:

Three main scenarios can be envisioned for the future of Iran's role in shaping regional security:

- **Structural Cooperation Scenario:** Iran succeeds in persuading Gulf states to adopt a collective security approach that minimizes foreign intervention and strengthens regional cooperation; however, this scenario is unlikely due to the prevailing lack of trust.
- **Chronic Polarization and Tension Scenario:** The intense rivalry and mutual deterrence persist without escalating to direct confrontation; this scenario is the most likely given the current realities.
- **Regional Flashpoint Scenario:** Escalation of crises to the brink of a security explosion (naval war, nuclear escalation, proxy clashes), leading to a complete reshaping of the Gulf interaction framework.

### Summary:

Iran's role in the Gulf constitutes a central axis in the regional security equation, not only in terms of the visions and initiatives Tehran advances, but also regarding the counter-responses they provoke, reflecting the magnitude of the challenge it represents. Between ambitious agency and structural constraints, Tehran remains an unavoidable actor in shaping Gulf security, yet it is not the sole actor.

## **Conclusion:**

This study has yielded a set of findings that help deconstruct Iran's conception of regional security in the Arabian Gulf by analyzing Iranian behavioral patterns, its structural and ideological determinants, and the implications for the Gulf's collective security system. It has become clear that Iran, according to an extended strategic vision, seeks to move beyond the role of a central state to achieve the status of a systemic power influencing Gulf security architecture, employing multiple tools ranging from nuclear deterrence to expansion through proxies.

The combination of the realist and critical-constructivist approaches allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities governing Iranian security policy, which cannot be reduced merely to material calculations of power but intersect with symbolic representations and identity constructs rooted in the revolutionary discourse and the notion of "strategic autonomy." In contrast, the responses of Gulf states appear dualistic: relying on traditional Western security frameworks while simultaneously attempting to build a fragile and fragmented autonomous security system. Accordingly, the study recommends the necessity of:

- 1) Reframe the regional security system based on the principle of mutual security balance, including Iran as an inescapable actor, without undermining the sovereignty foundations of the Gulf states.
- 2) Strengthen multilateral diplomacy in the Gulf through permanent dialogue mechanisms between Iran and the GCC states, based on the principle of "collective security" rather than "security against the other."



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- 3) Adopt a hybrid security approach that reconciles defensive readiness with constructive engagement, by employing soft power tools such as economic and cultural integration to break structural patterns of suspicion.

Betting on redefining security perceptions in the Gulf beyond the binary logic of hostility and alliance constitutes an inevitable strategic choice, in light of international geopolitical shifts and the declining reliability of traditional security guarantees. The future remains contingent on the ability of regional actors to move beyond the logic of alignment and hegemony toward a participatory vision of security based on equality and mutual respect.

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