

From Strategic Ally to Security Stakeholder: Türkiye's Growing Role in the Changing Gulf Order

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Abstract *The recent escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict has profoundly restructured the security architecture of the Gulf. It has exposed the vulnerability of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to direct security threats and spillovers in the region. The Iranian missile and drone attacks affected Gulf states and U.S. military facilities in the region. It has also disrupted maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz, thus highlighting the limitations of relying on a single security guarantor externally and also intensified the debates regarding the future of the security architecture of the Gulf. While the U.S. has responded militarily to the actions of Iran, the conflict has nevertheless enhanced the concerns of the GCC about the predictability, adequacy, and sustainability of the present security arrangements, instigating more focus on strategic diversification and regional resilience. In this context, this article studies the evolution of Türkiye from being a strategic partner to an evolving stakeholder of Gulf security. This article maintains that Türkiye's enhancing defense diplomacy, military cooperation, intelligence partnership, and political engagement position it as increasingly critical to the security of the region rather than merely an economic partner. The normalisation of relations post the Al-Ula summit, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, coupled with Türkiye's longstanding relationship with Qatar, has enhanced the capacity of Türkiye to become involved with the Gulf on wider security issues. The instability in the region and the changing perceptions of the threat in the region, intensified by the Iran-Israel conflict, create structural pressures on the Gulf countries. Although it is highly unlikely that Türkiye will replace the U.S. as the principal external security provider of the Gulf, it is increasingly evolving as a complementary stakeholder of the security of the region.*

Keywords: Türkiye, Gulf Security, Iran-Israel Conflict, Security Architecture, Defense Diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the security landscape of the Gulf region has undergone a massive change. The regional order traditionally rested on a relatively stable arrangement in which the United States acted as the principal security guarantor externally of the GCC countries (Bakir, 2023), while the threats in the region were primarily treated by the lens of interstate rivalry and energy security.

However, a number of geopolitical developments, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Uprisings of 2011, the Qatar crisis of 2017, post-Al-Ula normalisation, and most recently, the Iran-Israeli conflict, have fundamentally changed the strategic architecture of the Gulf region. These developments have enhanced the shift from a relatively hierarchical security order to a more complex and multipolar security architecture. The most consequential security crisis in the current west Asian region is the recent Iran-Israel confrontation. This conflict, unlike past episodes of indirect confrontation, has demonstrated the ability to spill through national boundaries, threatening critical infrastructure, endangering maritime routes, and the wider stability of the Gulf economically. Missile and drone attacks, apprehensions about the security of energy exports, and the increased vulnerability of strategic sea routes have reinforced the perception in the GCC that security in the region can no longer depend only on a single external player. Since the U.S.A. remains the most critical military ally of the Gulf monarchies, the crises in the region have recently intensified the discussion with regard to the responsiveness, predictability, and long-term sustainability of the current security partnerships. Consequently, Gulf states have increasingly sought to expand their alignments strategically, thus pursuing greater strategic autonomy.

This shift has created opportunities for new players in the region to take a more important role in the security of the Gulf region. Among these, Türkiye has emerged as one of the most prominent players. In the initial years of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) regime after 2002, Türkiye's relationship with the Gulf was mostly characterised by increasing trade, investment, and cultural interaction (Al-Atiqi et al., 2015). Security cooperation also existed, but it remained only secondary to economic relationships. However, over the last decade, Türkiye's role has expanded considerably. With defence-industrial cooperation, military diplomacy, counterterrorism initiatives, cooperation of the navies, and the permanent presence of a military base in Qatar, Türkiye has become an increasingly crucial actor in the changing security landscape of the Gulf. The normalisation of relations between the UAE and Saudi Arabia with the Türkiye post Al-Ula summit in 2021 further enhanced this transition.

Political rivalries, which were a characteristic feature of the post-Arab Spring period, slowly gave rise to pragmatic relationships driven by shared economic interests, instability in the region, and mutual concerns with respect to the future balance of power in West Asia. Türkiye has increasingly positioned itself as a stakeholder of security in the region rather than remaining confined to bilateral relationships, with the ability to contribute to the wider questions of stability of the Gulf, maritime security, modernisation of defense, and strategic resilience.

The concept of security stakeholders posits a crucial shift from the traditional understanding of strategic relationships. A strategic partner generally refers to a state that collaborates across selected economic, political, or military domains while simultaneously remaining external to the management of a wider security order of the region. By contrast, a security stakeholder assumes an active role in shaping the outcomes of security in the region with the help of sustained military engagement, institutionalised defense cooperation, mediation diplomatically, sharing intelligence, and contributions to the management of the crisis. This conceptual distinction offers a crucial framework for understanding the evolving role of Türkiye in the Gulf region.

As far as this article is concerned, it argues that Türkiye has undergone an important transition from primarily being a strategic ally of the individual Gulf countries to becoming an emerging stakeholder of Gulf security in the transforming regional order. More importantly, this transformation in Türkiye is not the result of being ambitious to replace the U.S. as the principal security provider of the Gulf region. Rather, it highlights the wider restructuring of regional security in which Gulf countries massively diversify their external partnerships because of evolving threat perceptions and geopolitical uncertainty. Therefore, the increasing role of Türkiye is perceived as complementary rather than substitutive, leading to a more diversified and networked security architecture of the region.

Theoretical Framework of Role Theory

Role theory provides a suitable analytical framework for understanding the evolving foreign policy of Türkiye in the GCC region. This theory initially originated in sociology and was later adopted in international relations by scholars such as K.J. Holsti (1970). Role Theory studies how states perceive of their roles, how these roles are designed by external and domestic expectations, and how they impact foreign policy behaviour (Holsti, 1970). Rather than seeing states solely as rational actors responding to material power, role theory holds that the state's behaviour is also determined by the perceptions of policymakers about the national identity, responsibilities, and expectations of other actors in the international system (Holsti, 1970). Holsti introduced the idea of National Role Conceptions (NRCs), explaining them as policymaker's roles and functions, that their countries should execute in the international system (Holsti, 1970). However, neither role is permanent nor fixed. They evolve as a result of changes in domestic politics, regional dynamics, perceptions of leadership, and transitions in the international balance of power.

The relationship between Türkiye and the Gulf

highlights an important evolution in its national role conception. In the early years of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Türkiye primarily perceived itself as a strategic partner of Gulf countries, stressing diplomatic cooperation and political dialogue. Throughout the 2000s, economic interdependence increased, and Türkiye increasingly assumed the role of an economic partner by enhancing trade, investment, building projects, and cooperation in the energy sector with the Gulf countries.

Upheavals in the region post Arab Uprisings, the Qatar crisis of 2017, and increasing instability in West Asia compelled Türkiye to adopt additional foreign policy roles. The recent restructuring of the security architecture of the Gulf, accelerated by the Iran-Israel clash, changing geopolitical competition, and the recalibration of the regional commitments of the United States, has further led to the expansion of the regional responsibilities of the Türkiye.

Rather than merely acting as an external actor, Türkiye has increasingly emerged as a security stakeholder in the region, and its security interests are deeply linked with those of Gulf countries. Its ever-enhancing defence-industrial cooperation, military presence, and participation in the security initiatives of the region highlight that Türkiye has become an active contributor to the security of the GCC region, rather than simply a strategic ally.

This article uses Role Theory to argue that the Gulf policy of Türkiye highlights an evolving role conception. The transformation of Türkiye from a strategic ally to an economic ally, mediator, provider of security, and ultimately, a security stakeholder in the region demonstrates how shifting regional dynamics have changed both Türkiye's perception of its responsibilities in the region and the GCCs' expectations. Hence, role theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the increasing political, economic, and security relationship in the shifting order in the Gulf region of Türkiye.

Türkiye as an Economic and Strategic Ally: The Foundations of a New Regional Role

The electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 was crucial in the transformation of Türkiye's National Role Conception towards the Gulf. The AKP's rise to power initiated a comprehensive transformation of foreign policy that sought to reposition Türkiye as an active player in the region. The rapidly expanding economy of Türkiye needed new markets for exports, investment sources, and energy partnerships, while the monarchies of the Gulf were pursuing the diversification of their economies that created the demand for the construction companies of Türkiye, infrastructure expertise, and manufacturing industries. As a result, bilateral trade increased massively, Turkish firms secured large contracts of infrastructure throughout the Gulf cities, and the sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf increasingly started investing in different sectors in Türkiye, such as banking, real estate, energy, and tourism. These deepening economic linkages created material foundations for wider political cooperation and fostered mutual confidence on both sides. With the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in September 2008, this relationship entered a

qualitatively new phase. With the signing of this MoU, Türkiye became the first country to be designated as the GCC's "strategic partner" (Cengiz, 2022). This designation acted more than diplomatic symbolism. Role theory demonstrated the external recognition of the evolving role of the Türkiye in the region.

Traditional Security Architecture of the Gulf

The Gulf security architecture, for much of the post-Cold War period, was made around the U.S. as the sole and principal external security guarantor and provider (Bakir, 2023). The GCC possessed massive financial capabilities, but it had no integrated defense mechanism which would be able to independently address the threats in the region. As a result, these countries, rather than making an integrated regional security system, were relying on bilateral defence arrangements. Scholars such as Gregory Gause argue that the characteristic feature of the security order of the Gulf has historically been an asymmetrical dependence on external military powers, especially the United States (Gause, 2010). Though relative stability was provided by this framework, a series of developments in the region, such as the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Arab Uprisings, the 2017 Qatar crisis, and the recent Iran-Israel clash and its direct impact on GCC countries, exposed its structural shortcomings and increased perceptions of insecurity among the Gulf countries. The Arab uprisings represented a critical transforming point as they exposed the U.S. willingness to intervene decisively in the crises of the region (Bakir, 2023). The U.S. administration's cautious approach to the uprisings and its unwillingness to become increasingly involved in Syria generated concerns among GCC states about the credibility and reliability of the United States' security commitments. This recalibration of the USA's engagement in West Asia gradually encouraged GCC countries to diversify their security engagement instead of depending solely on the USA.

Türkiye as a Security Stakeholder in the Region

This changing strategic environment, as discussed above, created space for emerging regional and extra-regional players to play a greater role in the security of the Gulf. Unlike other emerging allies whose involvement primarily remained confined to economy or diplomacy, Türkiye widened its defence cooperation, established a permanent military base in Qatar, increased its defense/industrial exports to the Gulf, and institutionalised strategic dialogue with GCC countries. Within this transforming security order, Türkiye's role evolved from that of a strategic partner to an increasingly crucial security stakeholder in the region.

Türkiye and GCC countries have institutionalised their security and defense cooperation. Both sides have ratified 27 bilateral defense and security agreements, encompassing MoU agreements about technical cooperation, military cooperation protocols, and laws (Bakir, 2024). These agreements cover a large number of areas, such as defense education, military training, intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism, border security, cybersecurity, defence-industrial cooperation, and joint military exercises (Bakir, 2024). The conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 between the United States and Iran (Einhorn and Nephew, 2016) created massive

concern among GCC countries with regard to the balance of power in the region. Gulf monarchies saw this agreement as signalling a potential U.S.-Iran reconciliation and feared that it would provide Tehran with more political and economic space and thus would make Tehran more capable of expanding its regional influence. These fears enhanced longstanding doubts about the reliability of U.S. security commitments and compelled the GCC to diversify its security relationships. In this changing strategic environment, Türkiye emerged as an increasingly attractive partner in the region because of its massive defense capabilities, indigenous growth of its defense industry, and its willingness for military cooperation. Thus, JCPOA did not directly lead to security cooperation between Türkiye and the GCC, but it contributed to the wider strategic context in which the role of Türkiye as a security stakeholder of the region gained greater significance.

The perception of decreasing reliability in the U.S. further deepened during the Qatar crisis of 2017. Although the U.S. remained the principal external security guarantor of the GCC, its response to the crisis was perceived as inconsistent and fragmented. President Donald Trump initially voiced in favour of the blockading countries (Al-Eshaq and Rasheed, 2022), but other departments of the U.S. government emphasised mediation and continued cooperation with the state of Qatar as it hosts the AlUdeid Air Base, which is strategically important for the U.S. in the region (Landler, 2017). These contradictory statements created an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding the ability of the United States, in the case of intra-GCC conflict, to act as a cohesive and impartial security guarantor. This subsequently created a perception among the Gulf monarchies that excessive dependence on a single external power carried strategic risks, hence strengthening their pursuit of diversified security relationships. Türkiye, in this changing strategic environment, distinguished itself by providing instantaneous economic, political, and military support to Qatar. These actions of the Türkiye, beyond strengthening bilateral ties, also demonstrated its willingness and capability to contribute directly to security during times of severe regional instability.

In January 2021, the signing of the Al-Ula agreement manifested a crucial turning point in the evolution of the Gulf security order. The agreement ended the Qatar diplomatic crisis, helped in reducing the intra-GCC crisis, restored relations among GCC members, and thus created a favourable environment for wider security cooperation in the region (Bakir, 2024). Reconciliation diminished the differences within the GCC countries, but it did not eliminate the underlying security challenges in the region. Concerns over the increasing influence of Iran in the region, maritime security, persistent instability in Yemen, and the changing regional balance of power continued to shape the GCC's strategic thinking. Al-Ula agreement also helped in facilitating the normalization of relations of Türkiye with United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, making Ankara capable of broadening its security ties beyond its close partnership with Qatar.

The Gulf security environment had further deteriorated by the recent escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict as it placed the regional security environment at the centre of the GCC strategic calculations. Although the

U.S. continues to provide the primary external security umbrella for GCC countries, recent clashes have reinforced observations that the security guarantees of the U.S. are indispensable but are not always sufficient to contain emerging threats in the region. After the U.S.–Israeli strikes on the Islamic Republic of Iran, all GCC countries have come under Iranian attack, despite refusing to be used as springboards for a war in Iran (Tostevin, 2026). This has further exposed the vulnerabilities of the security architecture of the Gulf and enhanced the strategic dilemmas faced by GCC countries. Missile and drone attacks in Iran have targeted civilian infrastructure and also the U.S. military facilities in the Gulf region (Tostevin, 2026). This shows that conflicts in the region can directly threaten the security of Gulf countries despite the continued presence of U.S. forces in the region. These developments compelled an extraordinary degree of operational cooperation and coordination among Gulf countries, driven less by political convergence than by a common recognition of interlinked security challenges. Simultaneously, the governments of the Gulf faced a very complicated strategic dilemma, such as the dilemma of whether to pressurise the U.S. for rapid de-escalation, continue relying on the military capacities of the U.S. to contain Iran, or direct involvement in the conflict through closer coordination with the U.S., although risky (Tostevin, 2026). This confirms the continued importance of United States security umbrella while simultaneously exposing the risks linked with massive dependence on a sole security provider externally. As a result of this evolving strategic situation, GCC states have intensified their efforts to diversify their security arrangements without leaving alliances with the United States. This evolving geopolitical environment has further strengthened Türkiye's external expectations as a contributor to stability in the region, thus consolidating its shift from a strategic ally to a regional security stakeholder.

The clearest manifestation of this changing role was the establishment of the Turkish first military base in Qatar. Türkiye's establishment of Tariq bin Ziyad Military Base in Qatar in 2015 marked the institutionalisation of Türkiye's direct military presence in the Gulf region (Cetinoglu, 2016). It demonstrates Ankara's willingness to provide tangible security commitments to its allies in the region. Ahmet Davutoglu linked the security Qatar with Türkiye's own security, stressing that the objective of the military presence of Türkiye was to contribute to a, "stable and secure Gulf" (Murdock, 2016). President Recep Tayyip Erdogan further reaffirmed this Role Conception when he told Bahrain's foreign minister that the military presence of Türkiye served the peace and stability of the whole Gulf region rather than Qatar alone (Al Jazeera News Agencies, 2017). Such official statements highlight that Türkiye stressed its regional role in terms of collective security of the whole region of the Gulf rather than a narrowly conceived bilateral relationship. The evolving role conception of the Türkiye was further strengthened by the official discourse of its leadership. The then foreign minister of Türkiye Mevlut Cavusoglu visited Oman in February 2021 and described Türkiye as 'the strategic partner of the GCC' and ensured Ankara's commitment to the prosperity, unity, and security of the Gulf region (Daily Sabah, 2021). During the reconciliation between Türkiye and the Gulf countries, role conception

became even more complicit. In one of his statements, President Erdogan declared that 'we do not separate the security and stability of the UAE and our other brothers in the Gulf region from the security and stability of our own country' (The Straits Times, 2022). Gulf monarchies have consequently become among the most important destinations for Türkiye's defense industry. Through enhanced military agreements, joint exercises, defence-industrial relationships, and arms transfers, the normalisation of ties with Gulf countries has expanded defence cooperation. These states have become increasingly crucial markets for the defense industry of Türkiye. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar represented nearly one-third (34.5%) of the total defense exports of the Türkiye between 2014 and 2023 (Bakir, 2024), highlighting the rapid expansion of the defence-industrial relationship and the increasing strategic convergence between the two sides. All GCC states, with the exception of Oman, have concluded defence-industry cooperation agreements with Türkiye.

The latest Iran-Israel clash has further strengthened the emergence of Türkiye as a security stakeholder of the region by exposing the shortcomings of the traditional security architecture of the Gulf. The extensive use of missiles and drones against the Gulf countries and the damage it inflicted on the critical infrastructure together demonstrated the challenges of relying only on U.S.-led security umbrella, despite the USA's continued centrality to the defense of the Gulf. As a result, GCC countries have increased their efforts to diversify their security partnerships by enhancing their cooperation with complementary regional powers in the Gulf region. Hence, in this context, Türkiye has gained much strategic relevance owing to its increasingly developing defense industry and its capability to provide cost-effective military capabilities, especially unmanned aerial systems, air defense technologies, military training, etc. Recent initiatives to broaden defense cooperation with these GCC countries illustrate this trend. In May this year, the defence minister of Kuwait Sheikh Abdullah Ali Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah signed a letter of intent with the president of Türkiye's Defence Industry Agency Haluk Gorgun, in order to strengthen defence cooperation (Kuwait Times, 2026). Other countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirate, and Qatar have moved in the same way to solidify arms arrangements with Türkiye. From the point of view of role theory, these developments indicate the growth of Türkiye's role performance and enhancing role recognition externally, because these GCC states increasingly view Türkiye not only as a strategic partner but also as a credible and complementary partner as far as the security of these countries is concerned within this changing and more diversified security order of the Gulf.

CONCLUSION

The shift in the Gulf security order in the post 2000 period has primarily reshaped the strategic environment in which regional and extra-regional powers operate. Geopolitical events like the Iraq war of 2003, Arab Uprisings, the Qatar diplomatic crisis of 2017, Al-Ula reconciliation, and most recently the Iran-Israel conflict, have exposed the shortcomings of the traditional security architecture which was mostly U.S. centred. Although the

U.S. remains an indispensable external security provider for Gulf countries, recent conflicts in the region have revealed the need for GCC states to complement the current arrangements of security through a wider network of regional partnerships; as a result, Gulf security is increasingly characterised by diversification rather than sole dependence on a single external power; in this changing regional environment, Türkiye has undergone a massive transformation in its foreign policy orientation and its role in the region. In the early years of the ruling AKP government, the relationship between Ankara and the Gulf was primarily driven by economic interdependence, diplomatic outreach, and political cooperation.

However, with the passage of time, shifting geopolitical dynamics and converging security interests have enhanced the scope of Türkiye's relationship with the Gulf and spilled over to defence-industrial cooperation, intelligence sharing, collaboration in counter-terrorism, naval cooperation, and a permanent military base in Qatar. Following the Al-Ula summit, relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE were normalised, which further led to the expansion of Türkiye's security engagement with these countries, and thus enabled Ankara to institutionalise its defence ties throughout the wider Gulf region.

This evolution, when viewed through the analytical lens of role theory, highlights a gradual shift in the national role conception, role performance, and external role recognition of Türkiye. The security and stability of the Gulf was increasingly articulated as inseparable from that of Türkiye by Turkish policymakers. This evolving role conception was translated into concrete policies by Türkiye through military cooperation and the defence-industrial relationship. At the same time, Türkiye was increasingly recognised as a credible and reliable contributor to the security of the region, as is highlighted by increasing defense agreements and enhanced demand for the defense technologies of Türkiye. Türkiye's shift from the strategic ally of individual states of the Gulf to a rising security stakeholder in the region is explained by the interaction between these internal role conceptions and external role expectations.

This transformation was further strengthened by the recent Iran-Israel War. The war highlighted the increasing complexity of security threats facing the current Gulf region. In this increasingly multipolar security environment, the rising defense industry of Türkiye, its expertise in military, and institutionalised security cooperation locate it as a complementary ally with the capacity to enhance regional resilience without opposing the present security framework of the United States.

The findings of this article suggest that Türkiye's enhancing role should not be perceived as evidence of a zero-sum distribution of regional power or as an attempt to challenge or replace the U.S. as the primary security guarantor of the Gulf. Rather, the rise of Türkiye shows the wider shift of the security order of the Gulf towards a more diversified architecture, where greater responsibility is assumed by the regional powers along the already established external powers. This transformation has crucial implications for understanding future Gulf security because stability will likely depend more on overlapping partnerships and complementary security provisions rather than

hierarchical alliance structures. As West Asia continues to experience geopolitical realignments, the collaboration between different powers of the region, different external security providers, and Gulf states will remain fundamental to the evolution of the security architecture in the region.

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