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Turkey's security role in the Gulf region: exploring the case of a newcomer*

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ABSTRACT



This study explores Turkey as a newcomer to Gulf security. It addresses why Turkish decision-makers want Turkey to play an elevated security role in the Gulf. It offers a holistic yet detailed outlook of Turkey's potential enhanced security role and develops a systematic argument that assesses Ankara's aspiration, will, and capacity to play such a role. Finally, it adopts a comparative perspective to show how the regional actors (Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and Iran) might perceive an enhanced Turkish security role in the Gulf; and where Turkey stands vis-à-vis the capacity of other extra-regional actors (the U.S., China, India, and Russia) concerning Gulf security.

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Introduction

During the last decade, the Arab Gulf monarchies have been diversifying their regional and international ties in anticipation of a strategic shift in the United States' (U.S.) global priorities from the Middle East region to East Asia where a rising China constitutes a major challenge for America's world dominance. The erosion of the American role as their primary security guarantor, in particular, has forced the Gulf States to pursue a diversification strategy in the security domain. This trend has opened a window of opportunity for more countries to be involved in the Gulf region. Although Gulf security has always been at the heart of the geostrategic considerations in

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the region and beyond, the U.S. detachment from the Middle East and the emerging multipolar power structure of the Gulf has fueled speculation on the prospects for Gulf security and the potential role of newcomers to the region. In this context, countries such as China, India, and Russia have been under the spotlight.

Even though Turkey's involvement in Gulf security has seen an unprecedented boost during the last decade, a review of literature on the region evinces that Turkey's case as a newcomer to Gulf security constitutes relatively uncharted territory for the scholarly community working on the Turkey-Gulf relationship. Turkey's role in Gulf security remains highly understudied, especially in comparison to the role of the other newcomers. Thus, the present study has two primary objectives. The first is to contribute to the growing discussions on Gulf security. The second is to fill the above-mentioned gap in the literature. It intends to do so by exploring Turkey's case as a newcomer to Gulf security. To that end, the paper develops a holistic yet detailed assessment of Turkey's case. It offers a systematic argument based on exploring, analyzing, and assessing Ankara's aspiration, will, and capacity to play an enhanced security role in the Gulf. The enablers and constraints related to such role are also evaluated within this framework.

This research is informed by the personal experience of the author as well as by his personal communications and structured interviews with senior Turkish, *Khaleeji*, and American officials. Some of these interviews were conducted in-person, while the rest were conducted by various virtual means. All the cited officials were still in their official positions at the time of writing this paper. Additionally, the study depends on sets of primary and secondary sources in English, Turkish, and Arabic. Regarding the structure of the paper, it is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the changing nature of the security construct of the Gulf. It introduces the newly emerging multipolar environment in the Gulf, outlines its characteristics and trends, and explains how it created an opportunity for Turkey to play a security role in the Gulf region. The second part explores Turkey's aspiration, desire, and will to play an enhanced security role in the Gulf region. It further discusses the enablers, causes, and capacity of Ankara. The third part is dedicated to discussing the challenges facing the aspiring Turkish-enhanced security role in the Gulf region. It adopts a comparative perspective to show where Turkey stands vis-à-vis the other traditional or newcomers to Gulf security as well as how regional actors might perceive an enhanced Turkish security role in the Gulf in comparison to each other.

The changing nature of the security construct of the Gulf

The year 1971 marked a turning point in terms of the security architecture in the Gulf region. At the end of that year, the United Kingdom (U.K.)

terminated its protectorate and military presence in the Gulf region. The Shah of Iran sought to fill the emerging vacuum by playing the role of the policeman of the Gulf. However, this role was short-lived as it coincided with a transitional period between the decline of British influence and the rise of the U.S. hegemony in the Gulf. The Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Soviet Union's (USSR) invasion of Afghanistan at the end of that year forced the U.S. to develop what became known as 'Carter Doctrine.'

This doctrine had several primary goals, including containing the spillover of the Iranian revolution, preventing the USSR from reaching the warm water ports of the Gulf, protecting oil wells in the region, and encouraging the cooperation of the regional states under its umbrella. It also introduced the idea of direct United States (U.S.) military intervention in the Gulf and the use of nuclear weapons if it deemed necessary to protect American interests.¹ Accordingly, the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) was created in February 1980, which subsequently turned into the Central Command (CENTCOM) in January 1983.²

Until the first decade of the twenty-first century, there have been three constants concerning Gulf security. First, the Arab Gulf States continued to suffer structural vulnerabilities on several fronts, particularly on the military and defense levels. This fact necessitated the need for foreign security provider or guarantor. Secondly, Iran continued to pose a major threat to the Arab-Gulf countries and the security of the Gulf region. This factor prompted the Arab monarchies to formulate their foreign policies under the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) umbrella based on countering the Iranian threat. Lastly, the U.S. continued to play the role of the security guarantor of the Arab Gulf monarchies and the Gulf region.

However, since the Arab Uprisings in 2011, new trends concerning Gulf security emerged. Although these trends did not impact the first two constants much, they significantly affected the third one, resulting in fewer economic incentives and rewards for the U.S. in the Gulf region and more burden and demands of security commitments from the GCC members. These trends include:

- (1) New forms of regional threats: In addition to Iran as a traditional threat, the governments of the Arab Gulf states have been facing new forms of threats such as the Arab Uprisings, the rise of terrorism and radicalism, the proliferation of the pro-Iran Shiite militias on their borders, maritime piracy, and intra-GCC quarrels.
- (2) Emerging vacuum: The emerging regional vacuum related to the U.S. detachment from the Middle East in the last decade or so has resulted in a power competition and fierce regional rivalry. Countries such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey have displayed assertive foreign policies and military activism. Other states, such as Russia, increased their military

presence and intervention in the region, while countries such as China and India increased their economic presence.

- (3) Reduced U.S. security guarantees: Although the GCC countries have depended on Washington as a primary security guarantor for decades, their trust in these guarantees have been shaken like never before. Several critical developments contributed significantly to this situation, especially during the administrations of Barrack Obama (2009-2017) and Donald Trump (2017-2021).

These trends have prompted the Arab Gulf states to seek novel ways to fill in the widening gap between increasing threats and decreasing U.S. security commitments. The GCC countries have responded to the newly emerging security-related trends by pursuing unconventional policies, including military activism and aggressive foreign policies. For a short period, the U.S. thought that this would be a positive development as it would lessen the burden on its shoulders and strengthen the collective security of the GCC members.³ However, the regional adventures of some of the GCC members in several theaters, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and the 2017 Gulf crisis did not end up well.

To shield themselves against the repercussions of regional fluctuations and to compensate for the decreasing level of security commitments from the U.S., the Arab Gulf countries have resorted to diversification strategies on three levels: diversification of weapons supplies; diversification of partnership; and diversification of alliances. Although the U.S. is still by far the most critical security player in the Gulf, the diversification strategies of the Arab Gulf monarchies opened the door for various regional, extra-regional, traditional, and newcomer actors such as China, India, Russia, and Turkey. This situation has led to what some scholars called the ‘multi-polarization’ of Gulf security.⁴ Among these countries, Turkey is the only actor that has played a noticeable and direct hard-security role in the Gulf as the U.S. has begun its pivot to Asia.

Turkey's security role in the Gulf: aspiration, desire, and will

When the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) ascended to power in Turkey in 2002, it launched a new, multi-dimensional, visionary, and self-confident foreign policy that elevates Turkey's status, role, and influence on the regional and international levels. Accordingly, Turkish foreign policy was formulated with reference to a holistic understanding of geography, history, and a sense of active agency to fulfill an ambitious vision, which aspires for Turkey to become, by the centenary of its founding in 2023, a global actor and one of the top ten most powerful economies in the world.⁵ The Middle East, in general, and the Levant and

Gulf regions, in particular, occupy a critical status in Turkey's ambitious vision.

Although this vision remained constant in the country's strategic planning as well as in the writings of various elites and decision-makers,⁶ the conduct of Turkey's foreign policy witnessed a shift following the Arab Uprisings in 2011. In the pre-Arab Uprisings period (2002-2010), Turkey's foreign policy relied on a charm offensive and soft power to achieve the country's national interests and aspiration.⁷ However, following the Arab Uprisings, Turkey's foreign policy had to respond to the changing security environment in its surroundings as well as to rising regional threats, which resulted in relying mostly on hard power and assertive policies. This is when the country sought to play a greater security role on the regional level and increase its direct hard-security presence abroad.⁸

The manifestation of Turkey's aspiration to play a greater security role in the Gulf region can be clearly seen in the case of the Turkish military base in Qatar, Ankara's first military base abroad. This aspiration goes back at least to 2014 when Turkey and Qatar signed their alliance pact. In 2015, Turkey had already sent some troops to be stationed at the Tariq bin Ziyad base.⁹ Several politicians, experts, and observers initially interpreted this step through a very narrow perspective. While some of them suggested its goal was to train forces allied with the Syrian opposition, others speculated that it is just a display of solidarity.¹⁰ They failed to see the broader context and the strategic rationale behind it.

In a December 2015 interview, Turkey's ambassador to Qatar, Ahmet Demirok, asserted that the 'multi-purpose' base would primarily serve as a venue for joint training exercises and countering common threats.¹¹ Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's Prime Minister at the time, revealed in April 2016 the broad mission of the base when he interlinked the security of Qatar with that of Turkey underlining that the goal is 'a stable and secure Gulf.'¹² Davutoglu's statement of stable and secure Gulf region is rooted in his 2011 speech entitled, 'Vision 2023: Turkey's Foreign Policy Objectives,' in which he highlighted that one of Turkey's strategic foreign policy objectives is to have 'a belt of stability, security, prosperity in the surrounding regions.'¹³

When the 2017 Gulf crisis erupted, the Saudi-led bloc comprising the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt put forward 13 demands as conditions to end the blockade against Qatar. One of these conditions demanded the immediate shut down of the Turkish military base in Qatar and halting military cooperation with Turkey.¹⁴ Ankara rejected this call and asserted that the base was a guarantor of security in the Gulf. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told Bahrain's Foreign Minister during the latter's visit to Ankara in June 2017 that the Turkish military base in Qatar was 'aimed at contributing to the security of the entire Gulf

region and was not aimed at any specific Gulf state.¹⁵ During a phone call between the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu told Tillerson, ‘The goal of the Turkish military base [in Qatar] is to protect the Gulf security and ward off foreign threats. There shouldn’t be any question marks or doubts about it... we see the security and stability of the Gulf as one of ours.’¹⁶ Likewise, Turkey’s Defense Minister at the time, Fikri Isik, reiterated, ‘The strengthening of the Turkish base would be a positive step in terms of the Gulf’s security.’¹⁷ Following the inauguration of the new headquarters of the Qatari-Turkish Joint Command at Khalid Bin Al Walid Military Camp in Doha in 2019, Erdogan emphasized the importance Turkey attaches to peace, security and stability in the Gulf region. He affirmed that peace in the Gulf region is key to stability in the Middle East. He said, ‘Your [Turkish forces]’ presence here serves the peace and stability of not only Qatar, our brotherly country, but also that of the entire Gulf region.’¹⁸

These Turkish officials’ statements on Gulf security provide ample evidence of Ankara’s aspiration to play become a security provider in the Gulf region. Moreover, they underscore that the Turkish military base in Qatar was not a reaction to some urgent and temporary security-related development, but rather a conscious, rational, and strategic choice that was made years before. In fact, during the 2017 Gulf crisis, Erdogan revealed that he proposed to King Salman to establish a Turkish military base on Saudi soil at least two years before the crisis, and although the Saudi King promised to assess the issue, he never came back with an answer.¹⁹ This is another firm indicator of Ankara’s aspiration, desire, and will to play a role in the Gulf security. While some might attribute these statements to the crisis at the time, systematic observation of Turkey’s stance on the Gulf security and Ankara’s willingness to play a greater role in the Gulf security following the Al-Ula agreement in January 2021, which ended the blockade against Qatar and paved the way for broader regional reconciliation, suggests otherwise.

During his official visit to Oman in February 2021, Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated in a joint conference with his Omani counterpart that ‘Turkey is the strategic partner of the GCC and we welcome the normalizations between the GCC countries and some other countries in the region. Turkey is supporting the unity, prosperity and security of the Gulf region.’²⁰ Similarly, in a February 2022 article in the Emirati newspaper, *Khaleej Times*, Erdogan stressed, ‘We do not separate the security and stability of the United Arab Emirates and our other brothers in the Gulf region from the security and stability of our own country.’²¹ Two month later, and following his visit to Saudi Arabia, the Turkish President stated, ‘I repeated our commitment to Saudi Arabia’s security and stability. I expressed that our security is no different than the Gulf region’s security.’²²

Therefore, the question is not whether Turkey has the aspiration, desire, and will to play an enhanced security role in the Gulf and assume a security provider role there. Regardless of its scope and volume, this has become evident. Rather, more useful questions are what prompted Ankara to seek this role, what are its enablers, and what made decision-makers and strategic thinkers believe that Turkey can or should play such a role?

The geopolitical context of regional (in)security

Following the Arab Uprisings in 2011, regimes in several countries refused to step down and decided to brutally crackdown on waves of peaceful popular protests. The U.S. reluctance and unwillingness to step in, coupled with the failure of Obama Administration's 'leading from behind'²³ policy in the Middle East, created a vacuum that was soon to be filled by non-state, regional, and extra-regional actors that fiercely competed for power and influence.

Consequently, GCC-U.S. relations entered a crisis mode. The trust of the Arab Gulf monarchies in the U.S. as a primary security guarantor was shaken for several reasons, including but not limited to: (1) In 2011, Obama administration initiated the pivot to Asia policy,²⁴ thus degrading the importance of the Gulf region on the American agenda; (2) Several Arab Gulf governments were shocked when they saw Obama asking Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak to start the transition process immediately instead of supporting him,²⁵ which prompted them to think that this must be their fate if the revolutionary tide reaches them and (3) They realized that Obama wants his 'legacy' deal with Iran no matter how much that would cost, and that this must come at their expense.

U.S. weakness was also exposed in Syria, which fell into a brutal civil war. Instead of acting to help overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, the Obama administration turned a blind eye to Iran's support for the Syrian government, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, and the flow of tens of thousands of Iranian Revolution Guards-affiliated Shiite militias into the country.²⁶ The U.S. President even retracted his own red line, thus encouraging the Assad regime to kill Syrians using chemical weapons.²⁷ Finally, Obama administration became involved in secret talks with Tehran that led in 2015 to a deal on Iran's nuclear weapons program. As a result, Iranian influence peaked in the region like never before, and radicalism and terrorism mushroomed. These unprecedented regional dynamics created a high sense of insecurity in the region, especially among the U.S.'s most vulnerable allies, such as the GCC countries.

These dynamics prompted Ankara to chart a new path characterized by assertiveness and a more autonomous foreign policy, prompting several regional countries, some in the GCC, to consider Turkey as a security guarantor, especially vis-à-vis the Iranian threat. According to a confidential

document linked to Hillary Clinton, the U.S. Secretary of State in the Obama Administration, the Saudis officially considered the option of Turkey as security guarantor as early as 2011. The document, which was made available by the Department of State, reads ‘In 2011 King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and his closest advisors had raised the possibility of Turkey replacing the United States as the security guarantor for the Kingdom, particularly in relation to Iran.’²⁸

Turkey’s quest for strategic autonomy (SA)

The Syrian crisis, including the indecisive position of Ankara’s U.S.-led Western allies vis-à-vis Assad regime, the rise of Syrian Kurdish militias in northern Syria, and Russia’s military intervention in the Syria conflict, contributed to a strategic shift in Turkey’s foreign policy. Throughout all these critical conjunctures, Ankara felt: (1) abandoned by its U.S.-led Western allies; (2) its national and regional interests were sidelined by those allies; and (3) its security concerns were totally neglected by them. Most importantly, the U.S. and several European states aligned themselves with the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG), a Syrian franchise of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and a designated terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S., NATO members, and the European Union (EU).

These developments all came at the expense of Turkey’s national security and interests. They signified that Ankara had to take matters into its own hands rather than depending on others. As Kutlay and Onis explained, ‘In Turkey, the “logic of interdependence” and the “mediator–integrator” role were gradually replaced by an assertive quest for “autonomy”, accompanied by military interventionism and coercive diplomacy.’²⁹ The 2016 coup attempt as well as subsequent events, including the 2017 referendum on constitutional changes and the 2018 elections, left deep marks on the country’s political system as well.³⁰ These developments resulted in the emergence of a presidential system with sweeping executive powers and a centralized decision-making process. This had a tremendous impact on the conduct of foreign policy and furthered the emergence of Turkey’s more assertive foreign policy and the quest for strategic autonomy.³¹

Additionally, in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, Turkey and the GCC states developed a symmetry of interests by virtue of their shared sense that the Obama Administration had disregarded their vital national and regional interests. Although Turkey and the Arab Gulf monarchies are both allies of the U.S., they were uncomfortable with Washington’s policies in the Middle East that ran against their national security and interests. The quest for greater autonomy in Turkey’s foreign policy as well as the feeling of insecurity in the GCC necessitated greater intra-regional cooperation between the two sides on a host of regional challenges and threats.

This trend was clearly demonstrated in the cooperation between Turkey and the Arab Gulf states, especially on Syria and Iraq as well as the expansionist Iranian agenda. During the Trump Administration, the GCC countries' distrust in U.S. security guarantees grew, especially following the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar in 2017 and the 2019 targeting of Saudi oil facilities, which is believed to have been executed by Iran.³² The U.S., as the primary security guarantor for the GCC countries, showed no substantial reaction against these threats, which resulted in the Arab Gulf countries looking for another layer of security protection. This urgency prompted Turkey to make stronger efforts to protect Qatar in 2017 and aspire a greater security role in the Gulf later.

Turkey's forward defense policy (FDP)

Amid the emerging vacuum in the Middle East, several factors provided Ankara a rationale to put its hard power into action and prioritize a FDP to tackle the rising hybrid threats, including the rise of radicalism and terrorism, hard power competition, and foreign interference in the form of military interventions and proxy wars. Turkey's hard power manifested in several forms, including extraterritorial military operations, military deployments on foreign soil, forward military bases, and displaying its land, sea, and air strength in several critical regional theaters in the Levant, the Gulf, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus.³³

Ankara's FDP rationale lies in two principles: (1) defense against rising traditional and untraditional threats in an increasingly turbulent and chaotic regional environment starts from outside its borders; and (2) regional security is highly interlinked. However, since most of the regional countries cannot undertake regional security missions on their own and foreign powers are not interested in contributing to regional operations that enhance Turkey's national security and safeguard its regional interests, the FDP stipulates that Ankara should tackle regional security threats largely on its own. Although this comprises heavy burdens and might pose several challenges to Ankara, a FDP also has the potential to create various opportunities, including elevating Turkey's status, influence, interests, and strategic value in the region and beyond. Thus, it serves the idea of Turkey as a reliable, committed, credible, and capable ally and security guarantor in the age of U.S. decline and disengagement from the region.

GCC states' structural vulnerability and reliance on outside protection

Turkey's FDP could not have been materialized without a rising, promising, and strong indigenous defense sector. Given the extent of political, financial,

and defense investment in this area, Ankara was able to reduce its dependency on foreign defense imports in a significant way from around 70% to 30% in less than 18 years.³⁴ Moreover, compared to the period between 2011 and 2015, Turkey's arms imports decreased by 59% in the period between 2016 and 2020, with U.S. arms transfers to Ankara dropping by 81%.³⁵ As for the turnover of the defense industry and aerospace sector, it increased from around \$1 billion in 2002 to more than \$11 billion in 2020.³⁶ Turkey's exports of the sector's defense products increased from \$248 million in 2002³⁷ to over \$4 billion at the end of 2022.³⁸ Given the pace and scope of the achievements in this sector and the strategic nature of the defense products currently under development in land, air, sea, and space domains, Turkish decision-makers believe Ankara can play a leading security role when it comes to countering threats, charting new security partnerships, expanding defense exports, and maintaining peace, security and stability in the Middle East.

Concerning the Gulf region, due to several factors such as the hostile nature of the geopolitical environment, the rivalry with Iran, the structural problem of the GCC countries' armies, and the need of the Arab Gulf monarchies to protect themselves against a host of rising threats, these countries have been traditionally: (1) relying heavily on foreign security guarantors, particularly on the U.S.; and (2) dedicating a hefty amount of the GDP to defense, security, and military expenditure. For example, according to a 2021 SIPRI report, three GCC countries were among the top ten arms importers in the world in the period between 2016 and 2020, with Saudi Arabia ranking 1st, Qatar 8th, and the UAE 9th.³⁹

From 2011 to 2016, GCC nations became more interested in developing defense and military relations with Ankara. The Turkey-GCC engagement concerning the defense industry, in particular, seemed complementary between Turkey's rising indigenous defense industry capacity and the GCC large defense budgets and appetite to import weapons and defense systems.⁴⁰ Between 2011 and 2016, Turkey and the GCC signed several defense industry agreements, and Ankara significantly increased its defense exports to the Arab Gulf countries. During this period, the UAE and Saudi Arabia ranked as the second and third clients of Turkey's defense exports, representing around 20% each as a share of Ankara's defense exports.⁴¹

The year 2014 marked the birth of unique relationship between Qatar and Turkey. The defense agreement between the two parties strengthened their defense and military ties resulting in building a military base to host Turkish troops on Qatari soil. From 2017 to 2021, Oman emerged as Turkey's biggest recipient of arms exports representing 16% of Ankara's total arms exports⁴² while Qatar came third with 14%.⁴³ These figures underline that there is room for more in the future, especially if Turkey maintains its rapid pace in developing its local defense industry.

Nevertheless, the 2017 Gulf crisis remains the most visible and credible indicator of Turkey's ambitions and will to play an enhanced security role in the Gulf.

the Gulf crisis accelerated the geo-strategic component of Ankara's Gulf policy, with Turkey becoming a key player in the security of the Arabian Gulf region for the first time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically, the crisis has proven that Ankara could play the role the GCC had intended it to play when Turkey was named as the first strategic partner in 2009.⁴⁴

Being a security provider: the question of challenges?

Challenges related to regional actors (GCC states and Iran)

Between 2017 and 2020, Turkey's relations with some GCC countries experienced difficulties, setbacks, and even crises. The 2021 Al-Ula agreement between the Saudi-led bloc and Qatar, however, ended the 2017 Gulf crisis and paved the way for the normalization of relations between the UAE and Turkey on the one hand and Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the other. This positive development proved that the fault lines and rifts between Turkey and some GCC countries matter less than shared interests and the regional strategic imperatives, which necessitate cooperation and coordination among various countries.

Having said this, the Arab Gulf monarchies rarely agree on foreign policy issues. Accordingly, it is sensible to assume they will not make a major departure from their norm of adopting contrasting positions including regarding Turkey's aspiration to play an enhanced security role in the Gulf. In this sense, the position of these countries concerning Turkey would vary in degree, circumstances, and time. Turkey enjoys a very cordial relationship with some of the GCC countries, notably Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman. Qatar has been in effective alliance with Turkey since 2014. As for Kuwait and Oman, these countries would probably endorse a more significant Turkish role in the Gulf,⁴⁵ if three primary prerequisites were met:

1. Maintaining the current rising ties with Turkey on the same course in the future.
2. Absence of a significant contradiction between Turkey and the U.S.
3. Absence of primary explicit objection, especially from Saudi Arabia.

Kuwait, in particular, is very sensitive towards Riyadh and would not prefer to challenge it or clash with it in times of tensions.⁴⁶ As for Oman, while it may have similar considerations – albeit to a lesser extent, especially after the positive developments in Saudi-Omani relations following the Al-Ula agreement – Oman might have to consider the Iranian position also,

given the nature and scope of its relations with Tehran, which is one of the regional competitors of Ankara.⁴⁷ The position of Kuwait and Oman during the 2017 Gulf crisis can serve as a good indicator concerning this particular point. Although the two countries enjoyed good relations with Ankara amid the crisis, both Kuwait's and Muscat's preference on a second layer of security protection went to the U.K., a former colonial power.

As for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, they do not share the same perspective as Kuwait and Oman, especially insofar as they consider the enhanced Turkish security role to be potentially directed against them. The ideological considerations of the ruling figures in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, in particular, as well as other complications, will probably hinder Ankara's quest to play a bigger security role in the Gulf, in particular if no major change is seen on the governmental level in these countries or in the nature of the relations with Turkey in the foreseen future. Nevertheless, zooming in on the two cases separately, we can see that the UAE and Saudi Arabia have different considerations that might result in different positions in the future. To the surprise of many, Abu Dhabi might be more open than Saudi Arabia, at least theoretically, to an enhanced Turkish security involvement in the Gulf, provided there is an extraordinary amount of confidence-building measures and the absence of ideological considerations. This is so for three reasons.

First, the UAE is already a home of several foreign bases, that host troops from the U.S., U.K., France, Australia, Italy, and others. This makes Abu Dhabi, in theory at least, open to the idea of foreign troops and bases compared to Saudi Arabia, which shows sensitivity towards the issue even though it hosts foreign troops too. Secondly, due to its relatively small size, the UAE is more pragmatic and flexible than Saudi Arabia. This means it can accommodate the idea that it might always need foreign bases and/or troops without fearing a public backlash. In Saudi Arabia, the calculations are different. In the light of the 1990s experience, the Saudi monarchy is always sensitive about the public foreign presence in the country due to public opposition on religious grounds. Hence, the idea of foreign bases is not favorable there in normal situations. Thirdly, while the UAE sees foreign bases as a source of strength, the idea of foreign military bases projects weakness in the case of Saudi Arabia, and this is the last thing the Saudi Crown Prince and the *de facto* ruler of the country, Mohammad bin Salman, wants. Additionally, given the popularity of Turkey in the Arab and Islamic world, the presence of Turkish troops in Saudi Arabia, from the perspective of the Saudi government, would undermine the image and legitimacy of the Saudi rulers in the Saudi public domain, unless it is meant to be an invisible deployment such as the Pakistani military deployment in the Kingdom.

Having said this, personal relations between the rulers of the Arab Gulf countries and foreign leaders play a critical role in taking unconventional decisions in times of urgencies. This exception might play into Turkey's

hands if Ankara and Riyadh managed to develop extraordinary relations on this level in the future.

Concerning Iran, it is a very difficult country and a historic competitor for Turkey in the region. Despite this situation, both countries have managed to cooperate on some regional issues in recent times, but at the same time found themselves in conflictual positions on many others. Although the 2017 Gulf crisis forced Ankara to come closer to Iran to help Qatar overcome the blockade, the Iranians are not pleased that Ankara is playing a bigger economic and security role in Qatar and the Gulf.⁴⁸ During the early period of the blockade, Iranian authorities obstructed the passage of Turkish trucks carrying food and goods to Qatar citing bureaucratic procedures. Additionally, they believed that Turkey is downsizing Tehran's economic relations with Qatar and that they should have a bigger share.⁴⁹ This situation continued until the three parties (Turkey, Qatar, and Iran) had a verbal agreement in August 2017⁵⁰ and a signed one in November 2017.⁵¹ Likewise, the Iranians were not happy with Turkey's direct military presence in the Gulf through Qatar. For example, they have expressed concerns regarding the possible permanent deployment of Turkish jets in Doha.⁵²

The manifestation of this complex relationship between Turkey and Iran can be clearly seen in Iraq, Syria, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, among other theaters. In fact, the Iranian strategy vis-à-vis Turkey in the Middle East is based on blocking Ankara's roads to the Gulf region by cutting it off from the land connection extending Iranian positions from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon, where Iran has been investing heavily in efforts to counter Turkey.

Challenges related to extra-regional actors (U.S. and the newcomers)

Since Great Britain formally withdrew from the Gulf region in 1971, the U.S. has been the primary security provider of the Arab Gulf monarchies and the Gulf region as a whole. This role dramatically peaked following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In the last decade or so, however, the U.S. has been trying to disengage from the region and shift more resources to East Asia to focus on its primary strategic challenge on the world stage, rising China. The U.S. shift in focus and resources creates opportunities for other regional and international players who aspire a bigger role in the Gulf and the Middle East, including Turkey. Despite the fact that no one player can substitute the U.S. role in the Gulf at the current moment, Washington might welcome burden sharing from some countries on selective bases in order to 'do more with less' in the Gulf while staying focused on China in the Far East.

This situation might offer an opportunity for Ankara to play a bigger role in the Gulf, yet this assumption is highly dependent on the nature of relations

between the U.S. and Turkey as Washington would likely block an enhanced Turkish role in the Gulf if it sees it as incompatible with its own agenda and interests there. Two primary challenges are expected to face Ankara in this situation: (1) Turkey has been strengthening its autonomous foreign policy in the last decade or so and the U.S. is not quite comfortable with it; and (2) The U.S. seems to favor delegating more responsibilities and granting bigger role to an umbrella bloc comprised of Israel and the Arab Gulf monarchies rather than Turkey, at least at present. Many variables can influence the U.S. decision in the future including the nature of relations between Turkey and the GCC countries, Turkey and Iran, Turkey and Israel, as well as Turkey and the U.S. of course.

As for the other foreign powers that might have a stake in the Gulf such as Russia, China, and India, all of them have been increasing their footprint in the region in the last few years. India considers the Gulf to be an integral part of its 'extended neighborhood' due to geographic proximity and its aspiration to expand its sphere of interest and influence to the west under the 'look West' policy.⁵³ India's volume of bilateral trade with the six GCC countries exceeded \$150 billion in 2021-2022. As the world's third largest consumer of energy, India imports around 80% of its energy needs, with much of it coming from the Gulf region.⁵⁴ Given its economic growth, it is expected that India's reliance on the GCC states for oil and gas will increase in the future. Besides the economic and energy interests, India has more than 8.5 million expatriates in the GCC countries, making Indians the largest ethnic-minority group in the GCC countries.⁵⁵ These expatriates do not only constitute a vital source of foreign currency income for New Delhi, but also a leverage for India over the GCC.⁵⁶

Regarding Russia, its relations with the GCC countries have gone under dramatic changes over the last two decades or so, especially following the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and Moscow's military intervention in Syria in 2015. Moscow's well-established relations with major regional actors such as Israel, Iran, and Egypt, as well as extending its military presence in Syria, including its naval base at Tartus and the Khmeimim air base, for which it signed a lease for 49 years with an option of extending it for another quarter-century,⁵⁷ could help Russia to influence geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East for several decades to come.⁵⁸ The GCC countries perceive Russia as an expanding regional power and influential player on global level, one that relies on hard power to pursue its foreign policy objectives. Reflecting an increasing interest in the Gulf region, Russia developed a security concept for the Gulf in July 2019 and introduced its collective security concept for the Gulf in August 2021.⁵⁹

Although the volume of bilateral trade between Russia and the GCC countries is low and stood only around \$4 billion in 2019,⁶⁰ Moscow attracts

considerable investments from the GCC states.⁶¹ Yet, the most important aspects of relations are related to energy and security. On energy level, the two sides have an interest to cooperate and coordinate to keep oil and gas prices at levels they prefer. As for the defense sector, Russia is the world's second arms exporter and Middle East's second largest supplier of weapons.⁶² The GCC countries have been increasing their arms imports from Russia in the last two decades,⁶³ and at certain times, they use Moscow as a leverage against Washington. The UAE, in particular, has been among major buyers of Russian arms in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁶⁴

Concerning China, Beijing is a heavyweight newcomer to the Gulf region. Just two decades ago, Beijing's footprints were almost non-existent. Today, China is the top trade partner of the GCC countries and constitutes around 15.8% of the bloc's total trade with the world. As the world's top oil importer, China relies heavily on the Gulf for oil and gas. It is the largest energy importer from the region and the biggest FDI investor in the GCC countries. The total Chinese investments and construction projects in the GCC between 2005 and 2021 surpassed \$100 billion.⁶⁵ In this sense, the Gulf region is directly tied to China's economic and energy security. Additionally, China offers the Arab Gulf monarchies a unique opportunity to benefit from its surveillance technology, 5G networks, and artificial intelligence.⁶⁶

During the last decade or so, China has developed several official policies that reflect its vision towards the nature and scope of cooperation with the GCC countries and its understanding of Gulf security. These include the '1 + 2 + 3' framework in 2014, a 2015 white paper on military strategy,⁶⁷ and China's Arab policy paper in 2016.⁶⁸ Additionally, China's arms exports to the Gulf countries and military-to-military cooperation have increased recently. U.S. intelligence reports from 2021 suggest that China is helping Saudi Arabia in developing its missile and nuclear programs.⁶⁹ During the same year, the U.S. uncovered that Beijing was trying to build what it thinks is a secret military facility in the UAE.⁷⁰ As China's military power and its common interests with the GCC continue to grow rapidly, it will ultimately increase its power projection capabilities in the region.

Therefore, we assess that the growing interests and role of China, India, and Russia in the Gulf region could constitute a challenge for the emerging Turkish security role in the Gulf for a number of reasons, including but not limited to:

- (1) These countries have much more developed relations with the GCC members on political, economic, and even military levels compared to Turkey.
- (2) They have much bigger economy and defense industry compared to Turkey, which means they have bigger capacity to tolerate costs associated with the required tasks related to Gulf security.

- (3) They have more motivation to play a bigger role in the Gulf region in the future or at least be a part of security arrangements in the Gulf, especially in the case of China and India.
- (4) They are seen by the GCC states as an effective hedging partners vis-à-vis the declining U.S., especially in the case of China.
- (5) Contrary to Turkey, they are nuclear powers and two of them, China and Russia, are members of the United Nations Security Council with veto powers. In this sense, Turkey is seen as a less powerful player in terms of military and political power.
- (6) They have their own understanding of the security of the Gulf, which is usually manifested in new concepts, white papers, and policies. The fact that Turkey does not have yet such initiative gives the impression that the Gulf region is less important to Ankara compared to them.

Conclusion

Turkey's security-oriented role in the Gulf during the last decade has been largely shaped by several critical internal, regional, and international dynamics. Intra-regional dynamics, the nature of Ankara's ties with Iran and the GCC countries, as well as the shift in Washington's global priorities all contributed to Ankara's increasing security role in the Gulf. Nevertheless, the Turkish establishment's aspiration, desire, and will to seek an elevated security role for Turkey in the Gulf region have also been influenced by the country's internal dynamics. Turkey's increasingly autonomous foreign policy, the rise of its indigenous defense industry, and its forward defense policy encouraged decision-makers in Ankara to aspire to a more active role in the Gulf.

While Turkish officials have demonstrated that they have the aspiration and the will to play an enhanced security role in the Gulf region, Turkey's capacity is still a matter of question to some observers. The answer to this question is primarily tied to the nature and scope of its aspired role in Gulf security. Furthermore, the preferences of the regional and extra-regional active players in the security realm in the Gulf region, as well as the interests of other newcomers, might prove to be a hurdle to Turkey's ambitions. The challenges resulting in from this factor are not likely to be of temporary nature, which brings in the question of the future.

In a highly volatile and unstable region, the question of the future is difficult to tackle, especially with the countless variables involved in the situation. Yet, counting on continuation, some major trends would reduce number of possible scenarios and give us a glance at what might happen next. If the current trend of the U.S. detachment from the region continues and Turkey's rising regional posture and profile remain in the same direction in the future, along with its increasingly autonomous foreign policy and fast

leaps in the defense industry, Ankara might have an opportunity to fortify its position in the Gulf and advance towards an enhanced security role. Even so, the internal, regional, and international dynamics at play should always be taken into account vis-à-vis Ankara's aspirations as they have the capacity to hinder its ambitions in this regard. Additionally, Turkey has to stabilize its internal politics, boost its economic power, and significantly increase its business interaction with the Gulf countries to compete with the extra-regional actors and facilitate a possible enhanced security role in the future. At the current stage, there is quite a significant gap between Turkey's capabilities and those of the extra-regional competitors on economic and military levels. However, Turkey's geographic proximity, its willingness to share defense technology, and its reputation as a reliable, committed, credible, and capable partner during the last decade in different geopolitical theaters such as the Gulf (2017), North Africa (2019), Levant (2020), and the Southern Caucasus (2020), could provide it with leverage over competitors and facilitate its progress in the Gulf. Still, if the other newcomers managed to maintain or increase their political, economic, and military interests and influence, they would constitute a significant challenge for Turkey.

Notes

1. Khan, "The US Policy."
2. Johnson, "The Persian Gulf," 124.
3. Personal communication with US official, October 2021.
4. See for example Soubrier, "Gulf Security."
5. See Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision"; Davutoğlu, "Principles"; and Erdoğan, "Türkiye Builds."
6. See for example Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*; Erdoğan, "A Fairer World"; and *Duvar*, "Erdoğan declares."
7. Yavuz, "The Motives."
8. Kasapoğlu, "Turkey's Forward-Basing Posture."
9. AA Energy, "President Erdogan."
10. *Today's Zaman*, "Motivation Behind."
11. Finn, "Turkey."
12. Murdock, "Turkey Opens."
13. Davutoğlu, "Vision 2023."
14. *Aljazeera*, "Arab States."
15. *Aljazeera*, "Turkey: Qatar."
16. Personal Communication with Turkish official No.1, August 2021.
17. Butler, "Turkey Rejects."
18. Erdoğan, "We Don't."
19. *Daily Sabah* "Erdogan: Turkey."
20. *Anadolu Agency*, "Turkey Supports."
21. Bakir, "Cementing."
22. Gündoğmuş and Beyaz, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan."
23. Löffmann, "Leading from Behind."

24. Silove, "The Pivot."
25. Pinto, "Mapping the Obama."
26. Doran, "Obama's Secret."
27. Greenberg, "Syria Will."
28. Seen by the author. Parts of the confidential document were UNCLASSIFIED by US Department of State Case No. F-2014-20439 Doc No. C05787394 Date: 02/29/2016. Document can be found on: <https://foia.state.gov/>.
29. Kutlay and Önis, "Turkish Foreign," 1085.
30. See for example Neset et al., "Turkish Foreign Policy" and Aydin, "Foreign Policy."
31. See for example Bakir, "Mapping."
32. *Reuters*, "Special Report."
33. Akar, "Turkey's Military."
34. Erdoğan, "We Have."
35. Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman, *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, 6.
36. Demir, "Transformation," 37.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Hurriyet Daily News*, "Turkey Aims."
39. Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman, *SIPRI Fact Sheet*.
40. Oxford GAPS, *Turkey – GCC Relations*.
41. *Ibid.*, 42.
42. Oman shared the first place with Turkmenistan.
43. Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman, *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, 2.
44. Bakir, "The Evolution," 214.
45. Personal communication with Turkish Official No. 2, March 2022. Interview with Turkish Official No. 3, August 2022. Interview with *Khaleeji* Official No. 1, July 2022. Personal communication with *Khaleeji* Official No. 2, June 2022.
46. Interview with a *Khaleeji* Official No. 1, July 2022.
47. Turkish Official No. 3 disagrees with this notion.
48. Personal communication with a Turkish Official No. 2, March 2022. Personal Communication with *Khaleeji* Official No. 2 June 2022.
49. *Ibid.*
50. CNN, "Türkiye Ekonomi."
51. *Turkpress*, "Aralarında Kara."
52. Personal communication with *Khaleeji* Official No. 2, June 2022.
53. Quilliam, "The Role," 130.
54. Guzansky, "India Looks West."
55. Kohli, "Indian Migrants," 115–47.
56. Guzansky, "The Future Job," 134–41.
57. *Reuters*, "Putin Signs Syria."
58. Frolovskiy, "Understanding," 83.
59. Embassy of Russia, "Russia's Security Concept," and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Russia's Collective Security."
60. Kozhanov, "Russia-GCC," 183–203.
61. Issaev and Kozhanov, "Diversifying," 894.
62. Kuimova, "Russia's Arm," 1.
63. Hasbani, "The Geopolitics of Weapons," 81.
64. Borisov, "Russian Arms," 42, and Borschevskaya, "The Tactical Side," 9.
65. AEI, "China Global Investment."

66. Shanif, "Strategic Maneuvering."
67. Bakir, "The Emerging," 127.
68. China.Org, "China's Arab Policy."
69. Masterson, "Saudi Arabia Said" and Chaziza, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear."
70. Lubold and Strobel, "Secret Chinese Port."

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