



## ARTICLES

### Iran and the Gulf: The Era of Hassan Rouhani

MAHJOOB ZWEIRI

### Israel and the Syrian Crisis: Ardent Desire and Restrain Risk

YUSRI HAZRAN

### COVID-19 in Palestine: Nationalism and Sovereignty

YOUSEF M. ALJAMAL, ILISE BENSUSHAN COHEN, and PHILIPP O. AMOUR

### Reconsidering 'EU Actress' in Changing Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Region

DILEK LATİF and NUSRET SİNAN EVCAN

### Small State Foreign Policy in Central Asia: The Cases of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan

FATMA ASLI KELKİTLİ

### Increasing Realism in Turkish Foreign Policy during Post-Davutoğlu Era

ABDURRAHMAN GÜMÜŞ

# Iran and the Gulf: The Era of Hassan Rouhani

**MAHJOOB ZWEIRI**

Qatar University, Qatar

ORCID No: 0000-0002-5866-2096

**ABSTRACT** *The paper utilizes the theory of neoclassical realism as its theoretical foundation to understand the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). An insight is provided into defining Rouhani's foreign policy discourse and slogan, primarily towards the GCC, while addressing the significant shifts in the region, which implicated Iran's Rouhani stance towards the GCC and its members. The paper concludes with how the recent developments of the Iranian elections and Ebrahim Raisi will impact the future of Iran-GCC relations. From an analytical standpoint, it was found that Rouhani had difficulty engaging with the GCC countries due to impediments by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Similarly, the article highlights Rouhani's era in Iran's foreign behavior towards the GCC while exploring whether he achieved his foreign ambitions and provided a vision for the significant challenges awaiting the Raisi presidency.*

**Keywords:** Iran, Hassan Rouhani, Foreign Policy, GCC, Ibrahim Raisi

**Insight Turkey 2022**

Vol. 24 / No. 4 / pp. 65-82

Received Date: 21/2/2022 • Accepted Date: 13/10/2022 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2022244.5

## Introduction

**R**elations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>1</sup> have witnessed various phases since the establishment of the Islamic Republic following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Typically, these relations have been antagonistic, confrontational, and mainly influenced by the Iran-Saudi bilateral ties, with Iran being primarily perceived as a security threat to the GCC.

The Iran-GCC relations reached a critical climax during the two presidential terms of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2017) and (2017-2021), as the Middle Eastern region moved into chaos, with popular uprisings, the so-called 'Arab Spring' erupting in various countries where both Iran and countries of the GCC have directly or indirectly intervened. Furthermore, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)<sup>2</sup> was signed and eventually nulled, and other significant incidents have shaped Iran-GCC relations. In particular, the second presidential term of Hassan Rouhani coincided with significant changes in the Gulf, including the former blockade of Qatar, the Yemen war and the engagement of different regional and international players, the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the killing of Qassim Soleimani.

Having taken office following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), who left a deadlock in Iran's foreign policy, Rouhani's primary objectives as a moderate and pragmatic president were mainly directed towards achieving openness and repairing the international image of Iran. This included offering greater nuclear transparency, acquiring international trust, and lifting sanctions that potentially damaged the Iranian economy.

However, following the 13<sup>th</sup> Iranian presidential elections of 2021, and considering the illegibility of Rouhani, who would be the seventh president to run for office, it is important to define and analyze the milestones in the Iran-GCC relations during Rouhani's era, particularly in his second term. Within this context, this paper examines the dynamics of Rouhani's foreign policies toward the Gulf during his second presidential term to answer the following question: What legacy would Hassan Rouhani leave when it comes to relations with neighboring GCC countries?

The first part of the paper examines the evolution of Iran-GCC foreign relations from the regime's establishment until the end of the Ahmadinejad era and his legacy by reviewing previous literature and highlighting the main features. The second part focuses on defining Rouhani's foreign policy discourse and slogan, primarily towards the GCC, while addressing the major shifts that have occurred in the region, which implicated Iran's stance under Rouhani towards the GCC as a whole and towards its countries. The final part con-

cludes with establishing Rouhani's legacy regarding Iran's foreign behavior towards the GCC, exploring whether he achieved his foreign ambitions, and providing a vision of significant challenges awaiting the upcoming Iranian president.

### Iran-GCC Relations: From Attention to Tension

Iran perceives the Gulf as its "rightful sphere of influence" towards which its policies are "fluid and changeable" and are pragmatic rather than revolutionary.<sup>3</sup> During the 1980s, the recently formed GCC adopted various postures of "deterrence and accommodation" towards Iran,<sup>4</sup> while the Iranian regime has consistently sought recognition in the Gulf since the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988).<sup>5</sup> By 1988, this Iranian strategy was re-assessed, leading to a "transition from radicalism to accommodation." By the 1990s, it had transited to pragmatism, which became evident in Iran's neutral stance in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990,<sup>6</sup> thus surviving the isolation status through improving its mutual relations with its neighbors.<sup>7</sup> Later, while President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) had significant efforts at evolving bonds, it was President Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005) who launched his "dialogue of civilizations," leading to improving ties. Both Rafsanjani and Khatami believed that economic integration is possible when tensions with countries in the region are reduced,<sup>8</sup> so they aimed at achieving normalization in Iran's relations and engaging it in the security architecture of the Gulf.<sup>9</sup> Khatami followed *détente* as a foreign policy to achieve economic developments post the Iraq-Iran war. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei believes that normalization policies with the Gulf region may not be inconsistent with the *Wilayat al-Faqih* principle.<sup>10</sup>

During the Khatami era, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran advanced unprecedentedly.<sup>11</sup> However, progress between both countries stalled with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, ending this period of limited trust.<sup>12</sup> By the end of Khatami's term, GCC states became alert regarding the Iranian involvement in shaping Iraqi politics,<sup>13</sup> as following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the dismissal of a bulwark against Shiites there, GCC states felt exposed to the Iranian influence.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, none of the major regional events were more unwelcome in the GCC than the shifting of power towards the Shiites in Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) adopted a sharp hard-line foreign discourse toward Gulf countries, where he announced resuming uranium enrichment and "instrumentalized Iran's nuclear program as a political tool to



**Rouhani's primary objectives as a moderate and pragmatic president were mainly directed towards achieving openness and repairing the international image of Iran**

## Rouhani was not a newcomer to the political sphere and is very much a 'regime insider' in the sense that he is "deeply embedded in the Iranian political system"

towards the U.S. and Israel, Iran's increasing regional role and influence after the U.S.-led Iraq invasion, and also dispute over the three islands claimed by the UAE. Despite these tensions, economic and trade ties continued.<sup>17</sup>

Towards the end of Ahmadinejad's second presidential term, disturbances erupted in Syria, which made Gulf countries reconsider their threat perceptions and revive the Iraqi restructuring of power.<sup>18</sup> On another side, Iran's relations deteriorated with Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen as Iran supported Shiites in these countries.<sup>19</sup> However, Ahmadinejad's era was complicated as he followed a disaffection policy towards the GCC as a whole. Perhaps the situation was different for Rouhani. How far has Iran's foreign policy towards the GCC changed during Rouhani's reign? Does that indicate that the presidency influences Iranian politics? Why do policy shifts occur after the president is inaugurated?

### The Rouhani Doctrine: A Gleam of Hope

Ahmadinejad had cultivated confrontation with the West, unlike the presidency of Rouhani, which raised hopes and expectations to amend the situation. Indeed, Rouhani's advantage is that he is different from his predecessor. Where former President Ahmadinejad was "confrontational and parochial" in manner, Rouhani is "collegial and worldly."<sup>20</sup> While Ahmadinejad thought of economics as a domestic policy matter, the economic situation was critical to Rouhani, as he believed that strengthening the economy would expand Iran's regional role. Therefore, he assigned technocrats to his cabinet and purged Ahmadinejad affiliates from the government. The Iranian economy had momentarily flourished with Rouhani as currency stabilized, inflation was reduced, and business confidence was partially restored. However, towards the end of his second term, it had seen deterioration.<sup>21</sup>

Rouhani was not a newcomer to the political sphere and is very much a 'regime insider' in the sense that he is "deeply embedded in the Iranian political system."<sup>22</sup> He enjoyed the practice of diplomacy and possessed skills and knowledge on regional security matters, which made him a qualified candidate

for the presidency who would contribute to softening security issues with the Gulf. He was the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) (October 1989-August 2005) and participated in security matters in the Gulf. Even before Ahmadinejad arrived in 2005, Rouhani visited Abu Dhabi to calm UAE officials regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Ahmadinejad's presidency ended in June 2013, leaving behind a tumultuous foreign policy. Rouhani's Administration came to power to face daunting challenges, such as the nuclear crisis and Iran's economy under sanctions. Rouhani prioritized improving Iran's relations with its neighbors to bring peace and stability to the region.<sup>23</sup> The first positive development was the signing of the nuclear deal, which, directly after, Iran turned to the Gulf and hoped to improve diplomatic ties. However, *détente* was much more challenging during Rouhani's presidency, as the Arab uprisings continued to disturb the region.<sup>24</sup>

Rouhani's rhetoric is pragmatic and friendly. Mohammad Javad Zarif served as Iran's foreign minister in Hassan Rouhani's cabinet between 2013-2021. In an article published in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Zarif highlighted that the Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani era is prudent, moderate, and pragmatic. He aimed at shifting the Iranian manner towards dialogue and constructive interaction while protecting national security at the same time, achieving comprehensive development, and ending "Iranophobia," as described by Zarif in what came to be known as Rouhani's foreign policy manifesto. During his campaign, he promised to fix the critical state of foreign policy. The Rouhani Administration immediately negotiated with the P5+1 to reach an agreement for the nuclear program.<sup>25</sup> This was contrary to the position of Ahmadinejad, who repeatedly refused to discuss Iran's nuclear program at talks with global powers.<sup>26</sup> As Rouhani hails from the moderate Rafsanjani doctrine, he preferred rapprochement with the Gulf, despite the lack of interest by IRGC and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.<sup>27</sup>

To a great extent, Iranian foreign policies towards the Gulf should be read within the context of nationalism and anti-imperialism rather than Shiite expansionism.<sup>28</sup> Zarif confirmed that Iran would seek to resolve issues with its immediate neighbors, emphasize confidence building, and praise cooperation in its regional policies. For these endeavors, Iran proposed creating a security and cooperation arrangement in the region in 2013 to combat extremism and violence.<sup>29</sup>

Rouhani made notable moves towards easing relations with countries in the GCC during his first term. In his first press conference in Tehran, Rouhani promised to pursue a "friendly relationship with all its neighbors," especially Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> Immediately after he became president, Iran's foreign min-

Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani (3<sup>rd</sup> R) meets Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (3<sup>rd</sup> L) in Tehran, Iran, on February 15, 2021.

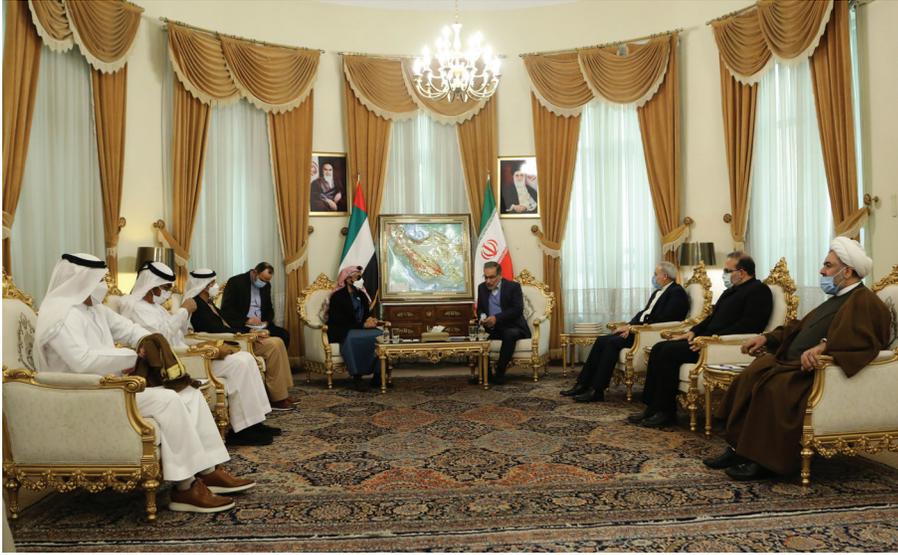
Iranian Foreign Ministry / Handout / AA



ister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, went on a tour of the Gulf states in what was called an Iranian “charm offensive,” where he was quoted in Qatar, saying: “We believe that Iran and Saudi Arabia should work together to promote peace and stability in the region,” and that the nuclear “agreement cannot be at the expense of any country in the region.”<sup>31</sup> During the same tour, the UAE president, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, accepted Zarif’s invitation to visit Tehran.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the election of Rouhani came to offer a sense of optimism.<sup>33</sup>

While Saudi Arabia welcomed the JCPOA on an official scale, its practice showed otherwise. Saudi Arabia’s opposition to the agreement arises from fears of sanctions removal and legitimization of Tehran’s nuclear program. Riyadh considers any convergence between Iran and the U.S. at its own expense, as Saudi Arabia enjoys U.S. security. The agreement would allow Iran to re-accelerate and resume its nuclear program. Finally, Saudi Arabia is wary that the deal will make Iran a “great equalizer,” making the GCC conventional military power less of an advantage.<sup>34</sup>

However, soon after signing the deal, Rouhani turned his attention to the Gulf. Zarif made official visits to UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman to discuss Iran’s ties with these countries. However, Saudi Arabia neglected Zarif’s announced interest in visiting Riyadh, and officials said that “the time was not ripe for such a rapprochement.”<sup>35</sup> The following months witnessed indications that the two countries were willing to relieve tensions resulting from confrontations in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen. This was evident when the Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, invited Iran’s Foreign Minister to visit Riyadh.<sup>36</sup> Per-



National Security Advisor of United Arab Emirates (UAE), Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan (C-L), meets Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani (C-R), in Tehran, Iran, on December 6, 2021.

FATEMEH BAHRAMI / AA

haps, Riyadh's incitation expressed acceptance of realities rather than efforts at resolving differences. Indeed, Iran's normalisation with the West is important for any GCC-Iranian rapprochement. A nuclear deal might have been an initiative for such a rapprochement.<sup>37</sup> However, Saudi Arabia was absent in the May 2015 President Barack Obama Camp David meeting, which the latter conducted to tranquilize concerns regarding the forthcoming nuclear deal and assure them of the U.S. "ironclad" pledge to their security. The absence was widely perceived as a snub.

The Arab uprisings, especially in Syria, came as a test to the constructive engagement principle of Rouhani in the Iran-GCC relations to see to what extent it would succeed in resolving entanglement over multiple issues. Indeed, Saudi Arabia saw Iran in Syria as a way to achieve regional control.<sup>38</sup> Iran supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and coordinated with Hezbollah to fight for the regime as well, forming an axis from one side. On the other side, Riyadh formed an axis to support the Syrian opposition. This led to a proxy battle.<sup>39</sup>

Also, the 2015 Hajj incident that killed more than 500 Iranian pilgrims in Mecca further complicated relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In 2012, the former Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon, Ghazanfar Roknabadi, escaped an attack in Beirut. Roknabadi was among the dead in Mecca. Suspicious Tehran demanded an Islamic consortium to administer Hajj.<sup>40</sup> To exacerbate tensions, on January 2, 2016, Saudi Arabia executed the Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr and others, accusing them of organizing terror attacks. In response, demonstrators burned the Saudi Embassy in Iran. However, President Rouhani sought to contain the situation and denounced the attacks as "totally unjustifiable."<sup>41</sup>

## Rouhani believed that improving relations with the GCC states would be key to achieving economic stability and development

In 2016, Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations and stopped air traffic and trade with Iran.<sup>42</sup>

When looking at the possibilities of rapprochement, in November 2013, the United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, traveled to Iran to inaugurate the new UAE Embassy in Tehran. Kuwait sought rapprochement when Emir Sheikh

Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah visited Tehran in June 2014.<sup>43</sup> Oman has closer relationships with Iran than any other GCC country. Both countries jointly control the Strait of Hormuz. They intensified relations after the election of Rouhani by signing a letter of understanding for Oman's imports of gas from Iran in December 2013, and Rouhani's first official visit to an Arab country was to Oman in March 2014. Their relations are tight to the extent that talks on laying a gas pipeline and building a bridge to connect both countries were re-evoked. Oman also opposed any aggressive measures towards Iran and lowered tones against Tehran in the GCC. Oman's conflict avoidance and neutrality approach made it a mediator between Iran and the West. This sensibly angered Saudi Arabia. However, Oman needs strong ties with Iran to restrain Saudi influence.<sup>44</sup> Bilateral Iran-Oman relations continued despite Oman's alignment with Saudi Arabia in the GCC.<sup>45</sup>

Rouhani has succeeded in improving relations with Qatar, especially after he launched a Joint Political Committee between the two countries in 2014 to find a political solution in Syria. Both countries share the Pars oil field, for which Iran sought Qatar's help extracting oil. Relations continued to be peaceful, regardless of disagreements on the Syrian issue, as Qatar has distanced itself from the Saudi sectarian rhetoric against Iran.<sup>46</sup>

The war in Yemen came as a "spoiler" to Rouhani's détente with Saudi Arabia. In fact, Yemen was a highly controversial matter in relation to IRGC-backed Houthis. During Rouhani's first presidential term, Iran's involvement in Yemen was an obstacle to normalization efforts. During that period, the former moderate Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani planned to visit Riyadh on March 31, 2015, but could not after Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis in Yemen. Indeed, Major General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force,<sup>47</sup> said, "winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East."<sup>48</sup> Rouhani, keeping a moderate discourse, said, "Iran is ready to restore ties with Saudi Arabia if it stops bombing Yemen."<sup>49</sup>

While the first presidential term of Rouhani witnessed a periodic détente with most countries in the GCC and was peaceful with Saudi Arabia in particular,

politics changed during Rouhani's second term. With the arrival of President Trump to office in 2017, the U.S.-GCC relations became stronger, a clear indication that Trump would seek to toughen its approach towards Iran. This was obvious in Syria and Yemen, altering the Middle Eastern balance.<sup>50</sup>

## **Rouhani's Legacy: A Pressured Atmosphere or a Failed Policy?**

The Iranian presidential elections of 2017 were indeed important. It expressed popular Iranian consent towards the nuclear deal, favoring openness rather than isolation. When Rouhani was re-elected, he was thought to have made concessions regarding the regional ambitions of Iran to prove to the GCC that Tehran wants rapprochement. This was a great opportunity for the GCC states to settle regional tensions. Rouhani believed that improving relations with the GCC states would be key to achieving economic stability and development. He, therefore, put the GCC at the top of his foreign policy program. In fact, Rouhani's re-election would leave a long-term impact on Iran-GCC relations.<sup>51</sup>

It has always been argued that Iranian foreign policy is ideologically based. This is true to some extent, as ideology still plays a very important role in formulating Iran's foreign policy. However, Rouhani and Zarif's foreign policy tend to be pragmatic. The reimposition of U.S. sanctions on Tehran in 2018 as a result of withdrawing from the nuclear deal –which significantly narrowed Iran's margin of maneuver– has come to prove this vision of pragmatic foreign policy, as Iranian authorities did not turn into ideologizing its policy, despite rhetoric and declarations by state officials.<sup>52</sup>

However, contrasictory statements by Iranian officials raised mistrust, speculation, and misinterpretation regarding Iranian intentions in the GCC.<sup>53</sup> However, it could be argued that the Foreign Ministry had become subordinated to what the IRGC was doing in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. While Rouhani started his election campaign in 2013 by prioritizing getting Iran out of the “security square,” it is clear that nothing was achieved regarding the region's view of Iran at the time. The unchanged perception is that with its regional interventions, Iranian foreign policy is proceeding in an extremist path in light of the militarization trends escalating in Iran since Ahmadinejad's era.<sup>54</sup>

Iranian foreign policy during the Rouhani era asserted that Iran was run by one color of politics, with different shades, with multiplicity existing in a tactical rather than strategic manner. Indeed, talking about openness in foreign policy or some pragmatism was a kind of tactic to achieve some economic breakthroughs –even if temporary– to alleviate social tensions due to the decline in economic conditions. The 2017 open foreign policy

approach as a result of the 2017 Gulf Crisis or the Qatar Blockade might not be necessarily acceptable in the region, keeping Iran's foreign policy exposed to accusations.

During Rouhani's second presidential term, many factors were gathered to prevent his cabinet from achieving its objective. These factors included the economic crisis, the escalating confrontation with the U.S. leading to Tehran's isolation, former President Trump's maximum pressure policy, Iran's involvement in proxy wars in the region, and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.<sup>55</sup>

In Rouhani's second inauguration on August 3, 2017, among the attendees were the Prime Minister of Qatar Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa al-Thani, the Minister of Culture of Oman Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, and a special envoy of the Emir of Kuwait. Their presence revealed conflicting positions between the GCC states on the Iran issue, especially following the blockade on Qatar. Iran pragmatically offered aid and assistance –despite having accused Qatar of sponsoring terrorism in Iraq and Syria– thereby tightening Iran-Qatar relations based on tactical convenience.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Iran benefitted from the intra-GCC rift. The U.S. turned the GCC into an ineffective group with the blockading of Qatar, which delighted Iran. Iran found the blockade a tremendous opportunity to overcome the influence of Saudi Arabia on other small GCC countries, thereby weakening the GCC, as Iran believes that Saudi strength lies in a united GCC.<sup>57</sup> This was the opposite result of the intentions of the Quartet, which was to reduce Qatar's ties with Iran, as was mentioned among their thirteen demands.<sup>58</sup> Providentially, the blockade on Qatar by the Quartet ended in January 2021, and it was considered to be extremely unsuccessful. The 2021 al-Ula reconciliation is likely amongst the GCC states, which may interfere with Iran's original approach to benefit from the inter-GCC dispute.

After the U.S. re-imposed economic sanctions on Tehran, Qatar Airways decided to add more flights to Iran to ease the crippling of Tehran's economy.<sup>59</sup> Eventually, in August 2017, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Iran. Its support to the Sunni state of Qatar in the GCC rift helped Iran prove itself away from the dichotomy of sectarianism, despite their conflicts in Syria and other areas.<sup>60</sup> With this convergence between Iran and Qatar, Saudi Arabia convinced the U.S. to withdraw from the nuclear deal.<sup>61</sup> 'Opportunism' is thus the attribute marking the Iran-Qatar relations. The durability of their ties is linked to their divergence over regional conflicts, such as the Syrian conflict, support for Hamas, and *Al Jazeera's* stance towards Iran.<sup>62</sup>

Iran lacked acceptance as a regional power by countries in the regional system, was excluded from regional talks on security, and was prevented from

normalizing its relations with countries in the GCC until the nuclear deal was signed in 2015.<sup>63</sup> Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait have taken de-escalatory measures toward Iran since the nuclear deal. Kuwait's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Sabah al-Khaled al-Sabah, visited Tehran in early 2017 and sought to establish a "basis for dialogue" in Iran-GCC relations. A turning point in Iran-Kuwait relations was the visit of the Emir, Sabah Ahmad al-Sabah, to Iran in 2014, as the first visit by any Kuwaiti Emir since the revolution. For Oman, it perceived the deal as a positive step to deter military actions and played a key role in setting up negotiations of the deal. Qatar acknowledged the deal as a dialogue framework between Iran and the GCC. Kuwait and Oman sought to maintain relations with Tehran especially with the growing concerns about the Quartet's strategy towards Qatar.<sup>64</sup>

## **The nuclear deal became effective at a time that coincided with the emergence of a new leadership in Saudi Arabia**

Following the nuclear deal, prospects for commercial relations between Iran and GCC were thought to be key in improving diplomatic relations, revealed in Iran's business relations with UAE, Qatar, and Oman. Dubai, for instance, acted as "Iran's window onto global trade routes." Also, Qatar's economic relations cautiously proceeded, despite their competition over gas exports. Finally, Oman already had strong ties with Iran regarding energy, labour, ports, technology, and water. The nuclear deal became effective at a time that coincided with the emergence of a new leadership in Saudi Arabia. This leadership intensified its antagonistic stance following JCPOA, as it feared being abandoned by the U.S. and Iran's integration into the global economy, making it difficult to achieve cooperation.<sup>65</sup>

Iran views the Saudi position on its nuclear program as an 'echo' of the American position, while Saudi Arabia believes that its concerns regarding Iran's program are 'legitimate.'<sup>66</sup> In fact, by signing the nuclear agreement, Gulf states believed that the U.S. abandoned them and became oriented towards Iran, which consequently led to Iranian acts of destabilizing the region, such as continuing support of Bashar al-Assad, its engagement in the war in Yemen, its relationship with Hezbollah, and with the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq.<sup>67</sup> Tehran is now convinced that stability requires resolving tensions at the regional level, which would be achieved by establishing a security networking structure that puts Iran and GCC states together in a unified security framework.

Tensions escalated after the devastating 2019 attacks on Saudi oil installations that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia blamed on Tehran. Matters worsened with the killing of Qassim Soleimani. The assassination coincided with an Iran-Gulf

## Rouhani encountered the challenge of balancing the full-pressure policy of the U.S. besides seeking and maintaining a stable and growing economy, which has not been achieved despite efforts

de-escalation in Yemen. With the assassination, Gulf countries worried that the U.S. is obliterating efforts to end the war in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia has worked to achieve a political settlement to end hostilities with Iran and the Houthis. The Gulf's turnabout and de-escalation with Iran were fuelled by the perception of the "unreliability" of the former Trump Administration and its' unwillingness to protect Gulf states.

Containing the Iranian influence by the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia since the signing of the nuclear deal has been part of a broader strategy of "instrumentalization of the Iranian threat" followed since 1981, in a way that Iran has become a "scapegoat for the intra-GCC crisis" of 2017.<sup>68</sup>

Recent developments have indicated that there have been renewed efforts to rekindle ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iraq is playing a vital role as a mediator in these efforts. Diplomats from Iran and Saudi Arabia met in Baghdad towards the end of August 2021 after a prolonged period of zero communication. Saudi Arabia officially severed ties with Tehran in January 2016. The recent developments in Afghanistan also implicate matters for the newly elected Presidency of Raisi. Historically speaking, Tehran has provided refuge and assistance to the Taliban for the last decade, apparently entertaining a shura council in Mashhad and rendering military aid. It is antithetical to the 1990s when Iran supported the uprising toward the Taliban emirate, the Northern Alliance, and nearly moved to war against the Taliban.

The interaction between the two parties has extended in recent years. Nevertheless, Iran follows a multifaceted hedging strategy, providing support to the government and the insurgents simultaneously while allegedly positioning its Shia militia, the *Fatemiyoun*.

### Conclusion

Since 2001, with the events of September 11, the post-Saddam Iraq and Arab uprising have increased Iranian influence in the region, causing an alarmed GCC. Hassan Rouhani's foreign policy was pragmatic, emphasizing realism and moderate prudence. International politics have been 'securitized,' and geopolitical developments in the GCC have had a notable impact on Iran. Iran has developed relations with individual GCC states, as each enjoys a unique identity and internal dynamics, rather than with the whole bloc as a



homogenous council. Paradoxically, even Iran's relationship with the UAE is not unified.

This was advantageous to Iran, providing strategic and economic opportunities. From a critical perspective, it must be understood that Raisi possesses the dynamism of an absolute political accord in the country due to his proximity to the Supreme Leader. Therefore, his foreign policy approaches are less likely to be hindered, as in the case of former President Rouhani. Raisi maintains a significant influence in the IRGC, which is instrumental in determining the country's foreign policy elements. The transition from former President Trump's Administration to current President Joe Biden has had little impact on Iran. Biden's Administration had defined backing for a diplomatic tactic to decrease apprehensions between Iran and the GCC states as a facet of their election manifesto. However, very little has materialized in this area.

From an analytical standpoint, this permits Iran to engage with its neighboring countries, such as Saudi Arabia, with more credibility than Rouhani, whose efforts were significantly impeded by the IRGC. With the re-emergence of neo-conservatism in the political spheres, it should be inevitable that the Iranian pitch would also change at regional and global levels. Neo-conservatives place a high emphasis on the role of ideology. However, while Rouhani promised to de-securitize and normalize neighboring Iran's relations, this is unlikely to happen under neo-conservatives. Therefore, within the broader regional

The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani speaks after the last cabinet meeting of the 12<sup>th</sup> government of Iran in Tehran, August 1, 2021. Iranian Presidency / AA

## Each new administration arriving in Iran has put into place a forward-looking country that is optimistic about the future

framework, Rouhani's legacy in relations with GCC countries will be significantly affected, perhaps reversed.

From a differing perspective, the shortcomings and challenges faced during Rouhani's Administration led to the defeat of moderates in the 2020 parliamentary elections

and a victory of neo-conservatives with the election of Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the former senior member of the IRGC. Ghalibaf attacked Rouhani for looking for solutions outside Iran. He characterized talks with the U.S. as being harmful.<sup>69</sup> Ghalibaf's remarks suggested that the next Iranian president was likely to be a conservative, signaling a shift in Iranian politics toward hardliners.

Rouhani's period has witnessed outreach to regional states and restored mutual relations. Dynamics involved in the suspiciously-lead Iran-GCC relations show that ties in the region are opportunistic, limited to economic cooperation, and are affected by the GCC state's frustrations with Saudi influence. Indeed, Iran-Saudi relations define and drive the policies of the GCC states.

When considering prospective relations with Tehran, Biden formerly announced his insistence to reintroduce the Obama Administration policy, one that contrasts the Trump Administration's confrontational tactics, pursued as a result of the Trump Administration's unexpectedly familiar relations with Saudi Arabia. Considering the U.S. factor as a determinant in Iran-GCC relations, it could also be argued that countries in the GCC feel cautious in two aspects regarding U.S.-Iran relations; primarily evident in the GCC crisis of 2017. Despite being perplexed with warming U.S.-Iran ties, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar, despite being perplexed with regard to warming U.S.-Iran ties, feel ready to compromise antagonisms towards Iran to eliminate the consequences of open confrontations between Iran and the U.S. However, Saudi Arabia, subordinate Bahrain, and to a lesser extent, the UAE, are not willing to neither accommodate nor admit re-rapprochement between Iran and the U.S., as it would lessen their luster with the U.S.

This also includes Biden's return to the JCPOA, which will be dependent on Iran and its return to its assurance of complete compliance. Progress in this area would permit the GCC to follow diplomacy with Iran on broader concerns. It will afford Biden a milestone prospect for improved transatlantic collaboration. The E3, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, are estimated to embolden this method to limit the Trump Administration's demolition by pursuing to resurrect the nuclear deal. If the nuclear deal had continued, Rouhani would have claimed other authority on Iranian policies, including a new one towards the GCC.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, Saudi Arabia refuses engagement with Iran and asserts tremendous pressure to weaken Iran or at least push it towards cutting support for proxy groups. Any de-escalation in regional tensions shall require recognition of different involved states and compromising and coordinating security privileges to be successful and durable. Iran and Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to recognize geostrategic exigencies and avoid short-term calculations to move toward long-term stability. Therefore, for some countries in the GCC, such as Qatar and Kuwait, it will be difficult to swim with the sweeping currents in the region, as Saudi Arabia still plays a crucial role in leading the region. However, the former Trump Administration had caused perpetual harm with its annulling of the JCPOA.

Rouhani encountered the challenge of balancing the full-pressure policy of the U.S. besides seeking and maintaining a stable and growing economy, which has not been achieved despite efforts. The parliamentary elections have brought into office the principlists, which are viewed as not only anti-West but also as deadly supporters of the Revolution. Therefore, Rouhani's performance during his second term is indeed consequential for internal and external policies, the future of the region, as well as the presidential elections.<sup>71</sup> In Iran, the obsession with preserving the regime and its cohesion comes at the forefront of the political scene and is the most important goal. Each new administration arriving in Iran has put into place a forward-looking country that is optimistic about the future. However, perhaps the outcome of the 13<sup>th</sup> Iranian presidential election in summer 2021 shall be subjected to the security of priorities. So, Iran may have entered a new phase dominated by conservatism.

The conclusion of the Iranian elections saw Ebrahim Raisi emerge victorious on August 5, 2021. This development signifies the commencement of a different age in the connections between Iran and its neighbors. Ebrahim Raisi has pledged to improve the relationships with the country's Persian Gulf neighbors, particularly its Southern Arab neighbors, such as Saudi Arabia. However, this has been eyed with doubt by the neighboring countries.<sup>72</sup> ■

## Endnotes

1. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional intergovernmental political and economic union consisting of Arab states of the Persian Gulf, namely: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The Charter of the GCC was signed on May 25, 1981, formally establishing the institution.
2. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal or Iran deal, is an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program reached in Vienna on July 14, 2015, between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -China, France, Russia, UK, U.S. -plus Germany) together with the EU.
3. Mehran Kamrava, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Middle East Institute*, (January 29, 2009), retrieved August 6, 2020, from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-gulf-cooperation-council>.

4. Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Power in Context," *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (June 2009), pp. 165-190.
5. Maaïke Warnaar, "Why Can't We Be Friends? Bridging the Divide between Iran and the GCC," in Warnaar Maaïke, Luciano Zaccara, and Paul Aarts (eds.), *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests over Historic Rivalry*, (Germany: Gerlach Press, 2016), pp. 109-110.
6. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran's Politics and Regional Relations Post-Détente," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (August 2007), pp. 29-44.
7. Reza Ekhtiari Amiri, and Fakhreddin Soltani, "Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait as a Turning Point in Iran-Saudi Relationship," *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 2011), pp. 193.
8. Noof Rashid al Dosari, "Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad There Is One Foreign Policy in Iran, which Is Khamenei's Foreign Policy," *World Journal of Social Science Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 2015), pp. 47-72.
9. Gülriş Şen, "The Prospects of Constructive Engagement in Iran-GCC Relations: The Levant Dimension," in Warnaar Maaïke, Luciano Zaccara, and Paul Aarts (eds.), *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf*, pp. 12-33.
10. Al Dosari, "Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad There Is One Foreign Policy in Iran."
11. Warnaar, "Why Can't We Be Friends?"
12. Sanam Vakil, *Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism*, (London: Chatham House: Middle East and North Africa Programme, 2018), pp. 1-16.
13. Afshin Molavi, "Iran and the Gulf States," *The Iran Primer*, (March 17, 2016), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-gulf-states>.
14. Thomas R. Mattair, "Mutual Threat Perceptions in the Arab/Persian Gulf: GCC Perceptions," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (July 2007), pp. 133-141.
15. Amal A. Kandeel, "Regional Upheaval: The Stakes for the GCC," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (June 2013), pp. 59-67.
16. Dina Yazdani, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and Hassan Rouhani," *IndraStra Global*, Vol. 7, (July 2017), pp. 1-5.
17. Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, "Iran-GCC Relations under President Ahmadinejad: 2005-2009," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 87-114.
18. Kandeel, "Regional Upheaval."
19. Jahangir Amuzegar, "Ahmadinejad's Legacy," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (February 2013), pp. 124-132.
20. Rodger Shanahan, *Iranian Foreign Policy under Rouhani*, (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2018), pp. 1-11.
21. Shanahan, *Iranian Foreign Policy under Rouhani*, p. 3.
22. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit, "Rouhani's First Two Years in Office: Opportunities and Risks in Contemporary Iran," in Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit (eds.), *Iran in the World*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 4.
23. Şen, "The Prospects of Constructive Engagement in Iran-GCC Relations."
24. Şen, "The Prospects of Constructive Engagement in Iran-GCC Relations."
25. Mohammad Javad Zarif, "What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (June 2014), pp. 49-59.
26. Ramin Mostafavi, "Ahmadinejad Aide Says Iran Not Ready to Talk Nuclear," *Reuters*, (October 31, 2010), retrieved August 7, 2020, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-talks/ahmadinejad-aide-says-iran-not-ready-to-talk-nuclear-idUSTRE69U0EN20101031>.
27. Molavi, "Iran and the Gulf States."
28. Warnaar, "Why Can't We Be Friends?" p. 117.

29. "Zarif Asks Saudi Arabia to Work with Iran," *Al Jazeera*, (December 2, 2013), retrieved August 9, 2020, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/12/2/zarif-asks-saudi-arabia-to-work-with-iran>.
30. Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iranian President-Elect Rouhani Promises Better Relations with West," *The Guardian*, (June 17, 2013), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/17/iran-hassan-rouhani-promises-moderation>.
31. Zarif, "What Iran Really Wants."
32. "UAE President Accepts Invitation to Visit Iran," *Al Manar*, (December 4, 2013), retrieved August 20, 2020, from <https://archive.almanar.com.lb/english/article.php?id=123869>.
33. Şen, "The Prospects of Constructive Engagement in Iran-GCC Relations."
34. Thomas Juneau, "Iran under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (August 2014), pp. 92-104.
35. Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Takes Charm Offensive to the Persian Gulf," *The New York Times*, (December 5, 2013), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/05/world/middleeast/iran-takes-charm-offensive-to-the-persian-gulf.html>.
36. Liz Sly and Ernesto Londoño, "In Thaw, Saudi Arabia Extends Invitation to Iran," *The Washington Post*, (May 13, 2014), retrieved August 9, 2020, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-thaw-saudi-extends-invite-to-iran/2014/05/13/b89a1d19-3b62-4e3e-9f56-730b8819e4e2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-thaw-saudi-extends-invite-to-iran/2014/05/13/b89a1d19-3b62-4e3e-9f56-730b8819e4e2_story.html).
37. Przemysław Osiewicz, "The Iranian Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf Region under the Rule of President Hassan Rouhani: Continuity of Change," *Przegląd Strategiczny*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (August 2014), pp. 249-262.
38. Akbarzadeh and Conduit, "Rouhani's First Two Years in Office."
39. Molavi, "Iran and the Gulf States."
40. Farhad Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy after the Nuclear Agreement*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 113-140.
41. "Iran's President Rouhani Says Saudi Embassy Attack Is Totally Unjustifiable," *Daily Sabah*, (January 2, 2016), retrieved August 18, 2020, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2016/01/03/irans-president-rouhani-says-saudi-embassy-attack-is-totally-unjustifiable>.
42. Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy after the Nuclear Agreement*, pp. 168-174.
43. Warnaar, "Why Can't We Be Friends?" p. 115.
44. Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (April 2015), pp. 112-122.
45. Yazdani, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and Hassan Rouhani," p. 3.
46. Yazdani, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and Hassan Rouhani."
47. The Quds Force is a unit in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps specializing in unconventional warfare and military intelligence operations.
48. Jonathan Saul, Hafezi Parisa, and Michael Georgy, "Exclusive: Iran Steps up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War," *Reuters*, (March 21, 2017), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>.
49. Deccan Chronicle, "Ready to Restore Ties If Saudi Stops Bombing Yemen: Hassan Rouhani," *Deccan Chronicle*, (December 10, 2017), retrieved August 9, 2020, from <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/middle-east/101217/ready-to-restore-ties-if-saudi-stops-bombing-yemen-hassan-rouhani.html>.
50. Hussein Ibish, "A Sequential Framework for Iran-GCC Détente," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, (August 30, 2018), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://agsiw.org/sequential-framework-iran-gcc-dete/>.
51. Yazdani, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and Hassan Rouhani," pp. 4-5.

52. Osiewicz, "The Iranian Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf Region under the Rule of President Hassan Rouhani," p. 119.
53. Reza Vaisi, "Iran, the GCC, and the Failure of Hope," *Middle East Institute*, (January 4, 2016), retrieved September 24, 2020, from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-gcc-and-failure-hope>; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Iran-Saudi Crisis Most Dangerous for Decades," *BBC News*, (January 4, 2016), retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35219693>.
54. Mahjoob Zweiri, "Alsiyyāsa Alkhārijīyya Ali` yrāniyya Wa Ali` ntikhābāt Alria` siyya... Hal Min Jadīd?" *Al Jazeera*, (April 18, 2017), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2017/4/18/تغييرايرالي-السياسة-الخارجية-عراق-الحقن-اي-سلا>.
55. Kulsoom Belal, "Emerging Politics in Iran: Last Year of Rouhani's Term and the New Conservative Parliament," *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (May 2020), pp. 105-127.
56. Luciano Zaccara, "The Challenges of Rohani's Second Term," *Real Instituto Elcano*, (October 30, 2017), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-challenges-of-rohanis-second-term/>.
57. Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, "Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (March 2018), pp. 438-439.
58. Marwan Kabalan, "How the Boycott of Qatar Failed," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (June 2018), pp. 1-4.
59. "Qatar Airways Announces More Flights to Iran Weeks after U.S. Sanctions Reimposed on Tehran," *Reuters*, (November 26, 2018), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-airways-iran/qatar-airways-announces-more-flights-to-iran-weeks-after-u-s-sanctions-reimposed-on-tehran-idUSKCN1NV20H>.
60. Luciano Zaccara, *Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities*, (Italy: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2019), pp. 1-14.
61. Pradhan, "Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines," p. 440.
62. Vakil, *Iran and the GCC*, pp. 11-12.
63. Zaccara, *Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis*.
64. Cinzia Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat Amid Shifting Geopolitics," *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (April 2020), pp. 92-107.
65. Zaccara, *Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis*.
66. Mahjoob Zweiri, "Ali` lāqāt Ali` yrāniyya Alsau`diyya Fy Ḍaw` Almalafāt Alsākhina Bil-Manṭiqa," *Al Jazeera*, (May 9, 2012), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2012/05/20125983013255262.html>.
67. Vakil, *Iran and the GCC*, p. 2.
68. Zaccara, *Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis*.
69. Shireen Hunter, "Iran: What Will Happen When the Conservatives Take Complete Control?" *Middle East Eye*, (June 18, 2020), retrieved August 8, 2020, from <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-how-will-conservatives-shape-foreign-and-domestic-policies>.
70. Bayram Sinkaya, "Implications of the Arab Spring for Iran's Policy towards the Middle East," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (January 2015), pp. 54-78.
71. Belal, "Emerging Politics in Iran," pp. 127-128.
72. "Saudi Arabia to Judge Iran's Raisi by 'Reality on the Ground,'" *Al Jazeera*, (June 22, 2021), retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/22/saudi-will-judge-irans-raisi-by-reality-on-the-ground-fm-says>.