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SYSTEMIC PRESSURES AND INTERNAL DYNAMICS: A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST EXPLANATION OF GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL MEMBERS' POLICY RESPONSES TO THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

Abstract

This study employs Neoclassical Realism to analyse the stances of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members towards the Israel-Palestine conflict. The study examines, by applying the levels of analysis framework, how domestic factors, along with systemic dynamics at the third level, influence the GCC states' policy stance vis-à-vis the conflict. By utilising a multi-level analysis, the research examines how third-level systemic dynamics interact with domestic variables to shape the foreign policy trajectories of GCC states. Using qualitative and interpretive methodologies, the paper explores the tension between traditional Arab solidarity for Palestinian statehood and contemporary geopolitical shifts in the Arab world—most notably the normalisation initiatives catalysed by the Abraham Accords. The complexity of the regional political landscape seems to have been further exacerbated by the events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent humanitarian crisis in Gaza. This has constrained policy options for GCC leadership in the succeeding years. This article investigates the nuanced interplay of elite perceptions, domestic stability, and strategic interests. The findings suggest that GCC policy responses are neither monolithic nor unidirectional; rather, they represent a complex balancing act between external systemic pressures and internal political imperatives.

Keywords: Gulf Countries; Gulf Cooperation Council; Israel-Palestine; Neoclassical Realism.

1. Introduction

The origin of the Israel-Palestine conflict can be traced back centuries as the conflict is not a modern phenomenon and is rooted in a complex web of religious, historic, political, ideological, and other dynamics. The protracted nature of the conflict has augmented insecurity and humanitarian challenges for the Palestinian people, even though numerous attempts have been made to find a sustainable solution and to resolve it.¹ Currently, it has become one of the most intricate and intractable

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¹ Raz Krauss Peer, *Understanding Israel's War in Gaza* (Germany: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, November 2023), 4.

crises, which has local, regional and global implications for peace, stability and security. However, the creation of Israel in 1948 was a turning point in managing the conflict, which faced historical opposition from the neighbouring Arab members and the Muslim community across the world.²

The conflict has attracted the attention of many regional and international actors due to its geopolitical ramifications. Of them, the GCC members, namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have had greater stakes than any other actors due to their sustained and critical interventionist roles in the conflict for geopolitical, peace, security, and development reasons, to name a few.

The most recent offensive by Hamas on 7 October 2023 has added another layer of complexity to the conflict and to the Middle Eastern stability. As a countermeasure, Israel launched a genocidal war against civilians in Gaza, in which “70,373 people, including at least 20,179 children, were killed, while injuring 171,079 people”, from 7 October 2023 to 11 December, 2025.³ The military operations resulted in using hunger as a genocidal tool, and destroying the civilians’ homes, schools, hospitals, commercial buildings and countless other resources.

GCC members’ positions are impacted by a number of complicated factors. Firstly, GCC members have historically supported the statehood of the Palestinian people. Religious resemblances, ethnic ties, and pan-Arab solidarity factored as the basis for the support of this cause. They have been providing humanitarian and moral support to the Palestinians in the face of Israel’s aggression, organised violence, and gross human rights violations and strong opposition to aid delivery. On 18 October, an urgent meeting was convened by Saudi Arabia under the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and later a joint Arab League-OIC summit was organised to chalk out a unified response to the situation.⁴ These diplomatic initiatives have resulted in modest symbolic or almost no visible impacts on the resolution of the conflict.

Secondly, over the last few years, the GCC member countries’ policies have transformed from traditional Arab solidarity to a focus on Arab-Israeli normalisation, pursuing peace based on geopolitical realities, national interests, and

² Song Niu, and Tongyu Wu, “Changes and Trends in the Current Relations Between Saudi Arabia and Israel.” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021): 172–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2021.1928413>

³ “Israel-Gaza war death toll: Live tracker,” *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/18/gaza-tracker>

⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “GCC States and the War on Gaza: Positions, Perceptions, and Interests,” *Arab Center Washington DC*, November 22, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/gcc-states-and-the-war-on-gaza-positions-perceptions-and-interests/>

regional rivalries. The Abraham Accords, signed by the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel in 2020 with the USA playing a key role, marked a crucial development in Arab-Israeli relationships in the region.⁵ Hamas might have translated the normalisation initiative as a losing relevance in the Middle Eastern politics and a betrayal to the cause of Palestinian statehood. Scholars have mentioned that the attack, in fact, was carried out deliberately to hamper the normalisation drive.⁶ It is opined that the aftermath of these has resulted in a more intricate puzzle for the GCC members, particularly for those who are trying to foster more robust ties with Israel, a balancing act.⁷

Finally, the USA has played a crucial role in exerting pressure on the GCC allies to carry on with the normalisation drive while denouncing Hamas for the attack. Bahrain and the UAE have condemned the attack led by Hamas and were of the view that the attack has only complicated the resolution of the Israel-Palestine peace process, not otherwise. However, they have also condemned Israeli aggression as a retaliation as counterproductive to the resolution of the conflict. The Israel-Palestine conflict involves a wide array of national, regional, and international actors and related interests catering to these. This hedging of the GCC members got themselves caught between a strategic alliance on one end and regional stability and moral commitment on the other.

The complex interactions of variables at all the levels of the levels of the analysis have made the Palestine-Israel conflict a very complex and protracted geopolitical puzzle. It could be an interesting academic exercise to understand why and how some actors, in their case, the GCC members get entangled into the mentioned crosshair of paradoxes, shift their sustained normative commitment and move towards a more pragmatic outlook, influenced by different interests manifesting at all three levels of the levels of analysis. The paper modestly contributes and delves into that direction.

This article is organised into five segments that examine GCC states' responses to the Israel-Palestine conflict by applying neoclassical realism. The first section introduces the research problem and scope of the study. The second section illustrates the gaps in current literature, outlines the research question, and lays out the methodological issues. The third section outlines the historical shifts and recent transformations in the

⁵ "The Abraham Accords: Israel–Gulf Arab Normalization," *Strategic Comments* 26, no. 8 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2020.1853892>

⁶ Jason Olson, Moran Zaga, and David Benger, "From Arab-Israeli Conflict to Arab-Israeli Integration: A New Curriculum for Understanding the Contemporary Middle East." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 15, no. 4 (2024): 346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2024.2409482>

⁷ Joshua Krasna, "The October 7 Massacre and the War in Gaza: Impact on Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/01/the-october-7-massacre-and-the-war-in-gaza-impact-on-bahrain-and-the-united-arab-emirates/>

GCC members' policy continuum. Section four illustrates the systemic pressures and domestic factors shaping GCC states' policies toward the Israel-Palestine conflict. Section five exemplifies the analytical ground and applies neoclassical realism to analyse the interaction between systemic constraints/pressures and domestic variables, allowing the readers to have strong theory-backed findings to dissect the responses of the GCC members. The last section concludes the study synthesises the major findings and offers insights into the nuanced and evolving GCC-Israel-Palestine puzzle.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Literature Review

The conventional wisdom portrays a gap in understanding GCC member countries' responses, using the neoclassical realist lenses, to the systematic study of the Israel-Palestine Conflict. The neoclassical realist framework integrates the nuanced symbiosis of domestic factors and systemic pressures to understand a complex conflict like the Israel-Palestine one. The existing literature focused on normative/ideational/intersubjective, strategic, and/or pragmatic factors. In doing so, these have understudied how GCC member countries resolve through internal decision-making actors, institutions, processes, and the external constraints.

Ahn applied constructivist framework and Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory and contended that GCC members' policies are impacted by the emotional inputs, for instance, amity and enmity, historical considerations, etc., factors.⁸ This signified how the normative/ideational features, like identity and narratives, play a role in enduring the conflict.⁹ Yetim and Kaşıkçı noted that there has been a diversity in policy options, choices and approaches. While Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE supported normalisation publicly due to "the Iran Factor", Kuwait, on the other hand, has remained cautious and opposed the normalisation given its complex ties to the Palestinian cause, societal composition, and different public influences.¹⁰ Oman and Qatar, on the other hand, followed a more go-slow approach- thus accepting Israel's regional ambitions and roles- and thus avoiding public critical remarks.¹¹ Jones noted this transition in policies as a shift from solidarity to pragmatism, of the GCC members on relaxation with Israel, driven by

⁸ So Yeon Ahn, "The Shifting Dynamics of Amity and Enmity in the Middle East: Analyzing the 2023 Israel-Hamas War through the Framework of Regional Security Complex Theory," *Asian Journal of Political Science* (January, 2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2025.2457159>

⁹ Ahn, "The Shifting Dynamics of Amity,"

¹⁰ Mustafa Yetim and Tamer Kaşıkçı, "Revisiting Normalization Dynamics between the Gulf Cooperation Council and Israel from 'Other' to 'Regional Partner'?" *Middle Eastern Studies* 61, no. 3 (2025): 329.

¹¹ Yetim and Kaşıkçı, "Revisiting Normalization Dynamics."

the economic and security interests, particularly after the Abraham Accords, even though a War on Gaza was in place.¹²

Qatar's distinctive approach is analysed by Aras and Ansari, who demonstrated its consistent prioritisation of Palestinian rights, conflict mediation, and opposition to Israeli occupation—even as other GCC states pursue normalisation.¹³ Using computational methods such as topic modelling and network analysis, they showed how Qatar's foreign policy remained anchored in advocacy for a two-state solution, calls for Palestinian rights and development and the end of the Israeli occupation, setting it apart from its neighbours.¹⁴ Niu and Wu noted that the Saudi shift in policies resulted from some factors, i.e. economic benefits, the fear of Iran's regional aspirations, etc., which have influenced this transition from secrecy to overt cooperation.¹⁵ UAE's changed position can be attributed to, but not limited to, leadership factors, US strategic pressures, and changing regional security dynamics, to name a few.¹⁶ Rabi and Mueller noted that the transformation of GCC-Israel normalisation can be understood in three distinct stages, from total isolation (1967-1979) to limited economic engagement (post-1979 era till 2003), to a takeoff era towards strategic affinity (post-2003 era).¹⁷

The influences of the second-level factors, i.e. Iran as a collective threat to GCC-Israel, are highlighted as well behind this transformation.¹⁸ Guzansky also noted in this regard that a paradox exists in the GCC members' policies; on one end, they think that reconciliation is conducive to the Palestinian's demand for statehood, while actually their drives towards normalisation have been influenced by Iran as a threat factor and US strategic rewards and incentives.¹⁹ This paradox has undermined the Palestinian cause and demands for a state.²⁰

¹² Clive Jones, "Israel and the Gulf Monarchies: A New Regional Security Complex or Just Complex Regional Security?" *Middle Eastern Studies* 61, no. 3 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2025.2455378>

¹³ Bülent Aras, and Majed Al Ansari, "Standing Tall like Caesar? Qatar's Unwavering Voice for Palestine at the United Nations." *Third World Quarterly* 45, no. 9 (2024): 1471–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2346214>

¹⁴ Aras and Ansari, "Standing Tall like Caesar?"

¹⁵ Song Niu, and Tongyu Wu, "Changes and Trends in the Current Relations Between Saudi Arabia and Israel." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021): 173-187, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2021.1928413>

¹⁶ Jonathan Fulton and Roie Yellinek, "UAE-Israel Diplomatic Normalization: A Response to a Turbulent Middle East Region." *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 5 (2021): 500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2021.1962200>

¹⁷ Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, "The Gulf Arab States and Israel since 1967: From 'No Negotiation' to Tacit Cooperation." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017): 577-578, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1360013>

¹⁸ Md Muddassir Quamar, "Changing Regional Geopolitics and the Foundations of a Rapprochement between Arab Gulf and Israel," *Global Affairs* 6, no. 4–5 (2020): 594-595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2020.1865110>; Rabi and Mueller, "The Gulf Arab States and Israel."

¹⁹ Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" *Israel Affairs* 21, no.1 (2014): 143-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2014.984424>

²⁰ Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States"

This literature showed that the factors behind normalisation could be, but are not limited to, change in ideational features, security concerns-driven pragmatism, and threat-dependent realignment influencing GCC policies. However, some questions and research gaps remained unanswered and underexplored, particularly how GCC members reconcile between systemic constraints at the third level of the levels of analysis with domestic imperatives at the first and second levels. Filling this theoretical vacuum could provide a deeper understanding of the nuanced and complex interactions of structures and agencies responsible for GCC members' foreign policy shifts.

We found a gap in the existing literature after examining it systematically. neoclassical realism has not been used in gaining insights into the GCC members' shifting responses to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The current academic literature failed to account for how the GCC members balance individual and domestic political constraints with systemic pressures to shift their policies, while the conflict continues to be protracted. neoclassical realism posits that a state's foreign policy is a product of systemic-level pressures (the anarchic international system) filtered through unit-level variables (domestic state structures and individual leader perceptions). Rose reviews major foreign policy theories and introduces neoclassical realism as an updated and more structured version of classical realism.²¹ His work identifies that a country's power is the main driver of its foreign policy, but its effect is indirect.²² He contended that a country's internal politics—like its government structure and the views of its leaders—filter external pressures, understanding foreign policy requires looking at both international and domestic factors together.²³

2.2 *Conceptual Framework*

The multifaceted connections of leadership, domestic factors and systemic pressures influenced the GCC members' foreign policy options and choices. The dynamics at all three levels of the analysis induced inherent tensions for the GCC members, and thereby push for choosing a balance among the factors at these three levels. This resulted in eventually changing their sustained position on Palestinian statehood as a form of ideational/moral/humanitarian commitment to normalisation with Israel for the prospects of strategic benefits. And, the changing scenario after the normalisation drive has been challenged by the factors stemming from internal and external pressures, which are again thought to be conducive to the Palestinian cause.

²¹ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy," *World politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-172.

²² Rose, "Neoclassical realism."

²³ Rose, "Neoclassical realism."

The fragmented Arab positions on Palestine, US strategic pressures over the Middle East, and Iran as a regional threat perception have shaped the GCC countries' reorientation of their stand towards the Israel-Palestine conflict, which is working as the key systemic drivers. These systemic drivers have influenced a fragment of the GCC members toward normalisation with Israel and fostering a pragmatic cooperation with the latter, particularly expedited by the Abraham Accords. The subsequent shifts signify the necessity of realpolitik inputs over ideational/intersubjective consideration among the Gulf countries' foreign policies. The diversity shaped the different pathways through which GCC members are navigating the conflict between Israel and Palestine, depending on their strategic calculations and domestic constraints.

To fully comprehend the complexity of the said conflict, we can apply the neoclassical realist framework. This framework would help us to understand how decision makers navigate through domestic political constraints, and pressures stemming from the international system level. The paper attempts to gain academic insights into the conflict as well as offers readers a path to understand the GCC states' foreign policy responses based on neo-classical realism.

Moreover, the study can be a stepping stone towards the critical assessment of the GCC states' roles and efficiencies in advocating for Palestinian statehood and peace initiatives. The study, therefore, provides a window for looking at the changed regional geopolitical landscape, the future of the normalisation drives, and possible policy scenarios to resolve the protracted conflict.

Behind this backdrop, the article aimed to find answer/s to this central research question: How do domestic factors (i.e. leadership, economic priorities, regime stability, public opinion, etc.) interact with systemic constraints (i.e. external/collective threats, regional power shifts, power distribution, great power politics and strategic influences, etc.) to transform the GCC members' foreign policy decisions towards the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict?

The authors choose an interpretive-qualitative approach to explain the transformation of the GCC members' foreign policy decisions towards the Israel-Palestine conflict. The authors chose a design that incorporated secondary data to ensure rigour and a comprehensive understanding of the research gap mentioned earlier. The authors relied on the systematic analysis of the secondary and primary literature, namely academic books, journals, articles, theses, monographs, policy documents, official publications from GCC governments and regional organisations, and briefs from research centres, verified media reports, archival materials and official statements and diplomatic press releases.

3. GCC Countries' Stances on the Israel-Palestine Conflict: Historical Perceptions and Shifting Dynamics

The section's analysis will assist the readers in comprehending current policy changes in a larger historical context. The authors examine this section into three critical phases, including the initial period of Pan-Arabism (1917 to 1967), implicit engagement to Arab-Israel rapprochement (1967 to 2010), and from rapprochement to normalisation (Post 2010). Beginning with unified support for Arab solidarity and Palestinian statehood, the GCC countries' stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict have experienced a gradual shift from Arab solidarity to Arab-Israel normalisation, shaped by numerous factors, including changing regional dynamics, economic interests and security concerns. Given this context, it is necessary to analyse the historical perceptions and shifting dynamics of the GCC countries' stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

3.1 *Pan-Arab Solidarity and Support for the Palestinian Statehood*

Although the Israel-Palestine conflict is fundamentally a modern phenomenon,²⁴ the origin of the conflict goes back thousands of years, as it involves competing historical claims to the same piece of territory. The controversial Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917, for the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine, is a critical factor regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. Emeli Ghory highlights that the declaration contradicts British commitment to Arabs as well as international promises.²⁵ As a result, the Palestinian leaders made repeated efforts to secure substantial backing from Arab countries in the 1920s for Pan-Arab solidarity.²⁶ The 1931 'General Islamic Congress' in Jerusalem brought the Muslim leaders' attention to the danger of Zionism, promoted Islamic collective solidarity and facilitated the internationalisation of the Palestinian cause.²⁷ Saudi Arabia and Iraq reacted positively to the Palestinian requests for assistance, and their positive response was not only for upholding Arab solidarity but also for obtaining support from a great power like the British in regional affairs.²⁸ Consequently, the outbreak of World War II posed critical challenges that diverted the Arab attention from the Palestinian situation.²⁹

²⁴ Joel Bainin and Lisa Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 2014, 1.

²⁵ Emeli Ghory, "An Arab View of the Situation in Palestine," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)* 15, no. 5 (1936): 686.

²⁶ Thomas Mayer, "Arab unity of action and the Palestine question, 1945-48," *Middle Eastern Studies* (1986): 331.

²⁷ Roberts, "Making Jerusalem the centre of the Muslim World."

²⁸ Mayer, "Arab unity of action and the Palestine question, 1945-48," 331-332

²⁹ Mayer, "Arab unity of action and the Palestine question, 1945-48," 332-333

While thinking about the post-war international system, the Arab leaders established the Arab League in March 1945 for greater Arab solidarity, self-determination and sovereignty. Since its establishment, the Arab countries have vowed their wholehearted support for the Palestinian cause by creating a special annex for the Palestinian independence.³⁰ The Arab League developed a propaganda invasive, particularly in Western countries, against the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine,³¹ aiming to influence the American public opinion as well as policymakers.³² Although the attempt was not effective, the Arab leaders closed their office in Washington in 1947. Subsequently, the Arab League adopted the boycott declaration on Zionist industry and trade in 1946; however, the economic boycott had not been successful from a political point of view,³³ but it did foster a psychological awareness about the Zionist activities in Palestine. However, the notion of the two nations for both Palestine and Jewish people based on the UN partition plan in 1947 further brought Arab dissatisfaction. As a result, Bsoul argues that the 1947 UN partition resolution and the declaration of a Jewish state in 1948 set the stage for increased violence and ultimately sparked the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.³⁴

The first Arab-Israeli war began between Israel and Arab countries, including Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, in May 1948.³⁵ Saudi Arabia also deployed expeditionary units to Jordan during the war.³⁶ Despite the advancement of Arab military forces in Palestinian territory, Israel defeated Arab forces and gained control of Palestinian territory. Inter-Arab rivalries, including various agendas related to their interests, were crucial factors that contributed to the defeat of Arab countries in the war. As a result, the war ended with the victory of Israel through the signing of the armistice agreement between Israel and the Arab countries except Iraq in 1949.³⁷

³⁰ Cecil A Hourani, "The Arab League in Perspective," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1947, 131.

³¹ Daniel Rickenbacher. "The Arab League's Propaganda Campaign in the US Against the Establishment of a Jewish State (1944–1947)." *Israel Studies* 25, no. 1, 2020.

³² Rory Miler, "More Sinned Against than Sinning? The Case of the Arab Office, Washington, 1945–1948." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 15 (2): 2004, 305–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290490448843>

³³ Donald L Losman, "The Arab Boycott of Israel," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 2 1972, 99–100.

³⁴ Labeeb Ahmed Bsoul, "1945–1947: Arabisation, Internationalisation, and Partition Resolution," In: *Arab-Zionist Perspectives on the Early Struggle for Justice in Palestine*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-74276-7_4

³⁵ Benny Morris, "The First Stage of the Civil War, November 1947–March 1948." *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, Yale University Press, 2008, 75–112, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1np9bm> and Morris, Benny. "The Second Stage of the Civil War, April–Mid-May 1948." *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, Yale University Press, 2008, 113–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1np9bm>

³⁶ Gawdat Bahgat, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," *Middle East Policy*, VOL. XIV, NO. 3, Wiley Blackwell, 2007, 50.

³⁷ Michael R Fischbach and Taylor L Williams, "The 1948 War and Its Consequences," in *Routledge Companion to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Asaf Siniver (London: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429027376>

Even after the defeat in the 1948 war, the Arab countries refused to recognise Israel's legitimacy as an independent state in Palestine and continued their political denunciation towards Israel. On the other hand, the Palestinian refugee conflict became the central concern of Arab countries. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) stated that there were approximately 1,317,749 Palestinian Refugees as of June 1966.³⁸ Subsequently, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war reached a high point in terms of both the number of refugees and the amount of territory into which they were displaced.³⁹ As a result, the displacement of Palestinian people was seen as a deep humiliation and injustice across the Arab countries. However, the landmark victory of Israel against Arab countries in the 1967 war reshaped the policy of Arab and Gulf states from ideological confrontation to restoring Palestinian rights to tacit cooperation with Israel.

3.2 From Outright Rejection to Implicit Engagement to Arab-Israeli Rapprochement

After the defeat of the June 1967 war, the Arab League declared the policy of 'Three No's', such as no peace, no recognition and no negotiation with Israel, through the Khartoum Resolution.⁴⁰ Although the Gulf countries had no diplomatic relations with Israel, a few nations in the Gulf were interested in close collaboration with Israel based on national interest. Israel and Saudi Arabia surreptitiously worked together against their common enemy, Gamal Abdel Nasser.⁴¹ Similarly, Qatar and Oman attempted to avert involvement in the Palestinian situation and did not completely implement the economic boycott against Israel and Israel clandestinely assisted Sultan Qaboos Said of Oman to ensure his role, although the direct contacts did not take place until Madrid conference in 1991.⁴² Yet, during the 1973 Arab-Israel War, the GCC countries, along with other Arab states, imposed an oil embargo against Israel's Western allies, particularly the USA and its allies, for their support of Israel's pro-Israeli stance. However, the economic embargo did not alter the policies of the USA and its allies towards Israel due to its low influence on the top-level policy makers in the Western countries.⁴³ Conversely, the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty,

³⁸ Arieh J Kochavi, "The US, Britain and the Palestinian refugee question after the Six Day War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 4 (2012): 537.

³⁹ Louise W Holborn, "The Palestine Arab Refugee Problem," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 23, no. 1 (1968): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070206802300105>

⁴⁰ Rabi, and Mueller, "The Gulf Arab States and Israel since 1967."

⁴¹ Rabi, and Mueller, "The Gulf Arab States and Israel since 1967".

⁴² Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" *Israel Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 134-135.

⁴³ Roy Licklider, "The Power of Oil: The Arab Oil Weapon and the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, and the United States," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 1988): 205-226, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600627>.

the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the 1980 Iraq-Iran War formed new dynamics for the Gulf monarchies.

The 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty was seen as a betrayal of Pan-Arabism and the Arab cause, particularly the Palestinian struggle. As a result, Gulf states, which formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) later in 1981, condemned and opposed distinctly against the Camp David Accord between Israel and Egypt, except Oman's moderate stance, claiming that Egypt's distinct deal with Israel was the recognition of Israel and against the commitment to Palestinian statehood. Aligning with the GCC states, Arab countries suspended Egypt from Arab League's membership and increased financial support to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Yet, Oman expressed its support towards the Accord, and Sultan Qaboos Said visited Egypt for the first time in 1982.⁴⁴ Hence, Egypt regained diplomatic relations with some of the GCC states without renouncing the Camp David treaty in the mid-1980s.⁴⁵

Another significant event is the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the changing nature of the Iranian government. After the massive upheavals by the Iranian Islamic forces, the US-backed Shah monarchy was overthrown; an Islamic regime based on Shia ideology had been established, and Iranian revolutionary regime made anti-imperialist policies that became a serious concern for the USA and its allies, particularly Israel.⁴⁶ Similarly, it also increased the Gulf countries' realistic security concerns. It is said that the primary objective of establishing the GGC mechanism was to ensure the Gulf states' unity against the security threat of Ba'athist ideology in Syria and Iraq, as well as the rise of Shia revolutionary ideology across the Gulf region.⁴⁷ This is because the ideology of the member countries of GCC are Sunni and the GCC countries have a large population who believe in the Shia revolutionary ideology.⁴⁸ As a result, the GCC states feared that the rise of Shia revolutionary ideology could also bring a new revolution in their countries. This security fear also pushed GCC states to develop their relations with Israel's ally, the USA, to counter Iran's ambitions in the Middle East.

⁴⁴ "Oman Leader Visit for the First Time Since Treaty Signing," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1982, accessed on November 4, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/09/world/oman-leader-visits-egypt-for-first-time-since-treaty-signing.html>

⁴⁵ William B. Quandt, "Camp David and Peace-making in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (1986): 357, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151620>.

⁴⁶ Enayatollah Yazdani and Rizwan Hussain, "United States' Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution: An Iranian Perspective: An Iranian Perspective," *International Studies* 43, no. 3 (2006): 267-269, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002088170604300302> (Original work published 2006)

⁴⁷ Ahmed A. Shahbaz and Allan Hassaniyan, "The Growing Autonomy for GCC States' Foreign Policy and Structural Changes in the Balance of Power in the Region," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 18, no. 4 (2024): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2025.2480007>

⁴⁸ Shahbaz and Hassaniyan, "The Growing Autonomy for GCC States'."

The USA signed a ‘Facilities Access Agreement’ in 1980, as well as conducted joint military exercises with Oman,⁴⁹ and Saudi Arabia’s arms deal raised an amount of US \$ 8.5 billion with the USA in 1981;⁵⁰ However, the relationship between the countries was criticised by both Oman and the Saudi society due to the USA’s close relations with Israel.⁵¹ Likewise, the relationship between the UAE and the USA increased in 1989, particularly in the case of repairing the UAE’s ship in the Jebel Ali port.⁵² In 1991, Bahrain signed a formal Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the USA,⁵³ And Qatar also signed the similar agreement in 1992.⁵⁴

After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, America directly intervened in the war by sending US troops to liberate Kuwait, which culminated in the defence cooperation agreement in 1991.⁵⁵ In addition, the Palestinian support for Iraq, further altered the policy of Kuwait, and approximately 10,000 thousand Palestinian were fled from Kuwait.⁵⁶ In the meantime, the policy of maintaining close relations with the USA and containing Iran opened new dynamics to GCC-Israel relations later. The GCC states participated in the US-led peace process known as the Madrid Conference, held in 1991 to accelerate negotiations between Israel and Palestine, commencing direct relations between Israel and Arab countries for establishing peace. Later, the Oslo Accords were signed between Israel and Palestine in 1993 in order to pave the way for an enduring solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict,⁵⁷ which also reopened the rapprochement process between Israel and GCC countries. For example, after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Israel and the GCC states’ economic collaboration started to take off.⁵⁸ Clandestinely, UAE also maintained bilateral economic collaboration with Israel.

On the other hand, in the wake of the second intifada against Israel all over the Gulf in 2000, the GCC states, in response to public opinion, took a unified stance

⁴⁹ John Bernell White, “Breaking the Strategic Glass: The Carter Administration and Oman, 1977–1980,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 26, no. 1 (2024): 156–195. https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_01195.

⁵⁰ Charles Mohr, “Saudi Awacs Deal Passes \$ 8 Billion,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1981, accessed on November 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/22/world/saudi-awacs-deal-passes-8-billion.html>

⁵¹ Rabi and Mueller, “The Gulf Arab States and Israel since 1967”.

⁵² David Mack, “The way for the US to ensure Gulf security is through partnership, not policing,” *Atlantic Council*, June 20, 2023, accessed on November 6, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-way-for-the-us-to-ensure-gulf-security-is-through-partnership-not-policing/>

⁵³ Kenneth Katzman, “Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, 2021.

⁵⁴ Katzman, “Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy.”

⁵⁵ H W Brands, “George Bush and the Gulf War of 1991,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2004.00038.x>

⁵⁶ Judith Miller, “Nowhere to Go: The Palestinians After the War,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1991, accessed on November 6, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/21/magazine/nowhere-to-go-the-palestinians-after-the-war.html>

⁵⁷ Ifat Malik, “Analysis of Oslo Accords,” *Strategic Studies* 21, no. 2 (2001): 144. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45242258>

⁵⁸ Ahn, “The Shifting Dynamics of Amity and Enmity in the Middle East.”

by condemning Israel's aggression in Palestine, although they avoided confrontation with Israel. As a result, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, along with other GCC states and Arab countries, the Arab Peace Initiative was proposed for the solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict in 2002, emphasising the normalisation of relations with Israel, in return for the establishment of Palestinian statehood based on the UN General Assembly resolution. Till 2005, Israel did not pay credible attention on it, while Arab states did little to advance it, except for the visit of the foreign ministers of Jordan and Egypt to Israel in 2007.⁵⁹

3.3 *From Rapprochement to Arab-Israel Normalisation*

The regional upheavals of the 2010 Arab Spring brought a remarkable transition of Arab-Israel relations. The rise of anti-government movements in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, led by Shia revolutionary forces, posed a serious security threat to the GCC countries, which shifted the attention away from the Arab-Israel conflict. In addition, Iran's influence on the movements pushed Gulf states to see Iran as a threat,⁶⁰ and the risk of Shia ideology in the region, resulting in domestic disunions and conflicts involving race and sect.⁶¹ Iran also pushed them as an assertive power and a crucial international actor with hegemonic ambitions in the region. Conversely, GCC countries, although Qatar maintained constructive relations with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, perceive that Iran's support for Hamas, Hamas's relationship with Hezbollah, Houthis, and the Muslim Brotherhood and the rise of Qatar-Turkey-Iran, undermine the Palestinian peace process and add additional tension in the region. Last but not the least, like Israel, the GCC states also perceive Iran's nuclear ambitions as a threat to national security as well as regional stability. As a result, these dynamics further intensified Arab-Israel relations.

Following the Arab Spring, Israel and Saudi Arabia have coordinated their bilateral relations on a greater scale.⁶² For instance, on the fringes of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Prince Turki bin Faisal al Saud conducted a bilateral meeting with former Israeli Foreign Minister, Livni.⁶³ Likewise, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paid a surprise visit to Oman in 2018, resulting

⁵⁹ Alon Ben-Meir, "The Arab Peace Initiative: Now or Never," *Willey*, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.2010.00031.x>

⁶⁰ Atilla Sandikli and Emin Salihi, "Iran, the Shia Crescent and the Arab Spring," *Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies*, 2011, 11.

⁶¹ Mohamed M Binhuwaidin, "Essential Threats to the Security of the GCC Countries in the Post Arab Spring Era," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12058>.

⁶² Marta Furlan, "Israeli-Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2019): 173-87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2019.1670500>

⁶³ Oren Liebermann, "How a mutual enemy is changing Israel-Saudi relations," *CNN*, November 26, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/25/middleeast/israel-saudi-relations>

in the advancement of Arab-Israeli normalisation.⁶⁴ In 2018, the former Cultural and Sports Minister, Miri Regev, visited the UAE in the opening ceremony of the 'International Judo Tournament' under Israel's national flag for the first time.⁶⁵ The Israeli minister also paid a visit to the UAE's Sheikh Zayed grand mosque and signed the guest book of the mosque as the first high official of Israel.⁶⁶ In the same way, a Bahrain religious group paid a visit to Israel to send the peace messages on behalf of the King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2017, although Bahrain condemned the US declaration of making Jerusalem as Israel's Capital and warned this move as direct impediment to the peace process.⁶⁷ This condemnation was fuelled by the domestic dynamics of public opinion. On the contrary, Qatar and Kuwait had almost divergent relations with Israel, although Qatar maintained a key role as mediator between Israel and Hamas because of Qatar's good relations with Hamas. Kuwait's approach to Israel was different as it espoused an adamant anti-Israel policy through using various platforms such as the UN and Arab League. However, the changing nature of relations laid the foundation of Abraham Accord signed in 2020,⁶⁸ a historic agreement between Israel and UAE as well as Israel and Bahrain, outlining the agreement as a strategic move over Iranian threat, a crucial passage to economic engagement, and a desire to ensure USA's security guarantees although the unresolved Palestinian issue posed enormous challenges to this normalisation process. Although massive demonstrations were apparent in the past, the accords faced a diminutive denunciation in the Arab countries.⁶⁹ As a result, the agreement brought the full scale of normalisation among the signatory countries and allowed Israel's participation in the alignment of the Middle East status quo.

Following the Abraham Accords, Israel opened its diplomatic mission in the UAE and Bahrain in 2021. Saudi Arabia allowed its airspace to fly Israeli aeroplanes from Tel Aviv to Bahrain as well as the UAE in 2022 further signifying GCC-Israel

⁶⁴ Isabel Kershner, "Israeli Prime Minister Visits Oman, Offering a Possible Back Channel to Iran," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/world/middleeast/israel-oman-netanyahu-visit.html>

⁶⁵ ToI Staff, "In first, Israeli judo team to compete in UAE tournament under national flag," *The Times of Israel*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-israeli-judo-team-to-compete-in-uae-tournament-under-national-flag/>

⁶⁶ Jeffrey Heller, "Israeli minister's mosque tour highlights diplomatic push in the Gulf," *Reuters*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/israeli-ministers-mosque-tour-highlights-diplomatic-push-in-the-gulf-idUSKCN1N31J4/>

⁶⁷ "Israel delegation to visit Bahrain after furore: report," *Aljazeera*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/15/israel-delegation-to-visit-bahrain-after-furore-report>

⁶⁸ Oliver Holmes, "UAE, Bahrain and Israel sign historic accords at White House event," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/15/uae-bahrain-and-israel-sign-historic-accords-at-white-house-event-formal-relations-trump-netanyahu>

⁶⁹ Amr Yossef, "The Regional Impact of the Abraham Accords," *Modern War Institute Report*, Series 2012, no. 2, 2021.

normalisation,⁷⁰ and Oman also joined with the Saudi's approach in 2023.⁷¹ Last but not least, Israel and the UAE signed a "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement" (CEPA) in May 2022, which came into practice in 2023, resulting in the decrease of tariffs on over 96% of goods.⁷² However, this normalisation process was further tested by the unforeseen attack of Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023, which involved the positions of GCC states as well as the Israel-Palestine Conflict.

The October attack by Hamas on Israel, and Israel's declaration of War against Hamas, brought high casualties and mass displacement in Gaza. During the War, the GCC countries placed condemnation against Israel, although Bahrain and the UAE condemned Hamas as well for the escalation of the conflict. However, the aggressive attack by the Israeli military soldiers on the civilian hospital forced both countries to later espouse stronger condemnation against Israel.⁷³ The citizens from all the GCC countries expressed their strong protest against the Israeli aggressive violence on the Palestinian people, which pushed GCC countries' solidarity to Palestine and also impeded the normalisation process with Israel. The GCC states continuously urged for an immediate ceasefire and pledged an urgent humanitarian program, declaring US\$100 million in aid to Gaza.⁷⁴ Even though the GCC states called several times for an immediate ceasefire of the Israel-Hamas conflict, they also expanded their military cooperation with Israel as well during the Gaza war.⁷⁵ The United States vetoed a Security Council resolution of the UN about the ceasefire in Gaza, 2023,⁷⁶ although they agreed on the Gaza ceasefire resolution at the UN Security Council in 2024.⁷⁷ Finally, the US and its counterparts Türkiye, Qatar and

⁷⁰ Kyle Blaine and Eliza Mackintosh, "Saudi Arabia opens airspace to Israeli flights," *CNN*, July 15, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/15/middleeast/saudi-arabia-israeli-airlines-airspace-biden-intl>

⁷¹ Ghaida Ghantous, "Oman opens airspace, joining Saudi corridor for Israeli carriers," *Reuters*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/oman-opens-airspace-joining-saudi-de-facto-israeli-airline-corridor-2023-02-23/>

⁷² Rachna Uppal and Lisa Barrington, "UAE plans long-term economic ties with Israel despite political strains," *Reuters*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-plans-long-term-economic-ties-with-israel-despite-political-strains-2023-04-03/>

⁷³ Sinem Cengiz and Betül Dogan Akkas, "Gulf Normalization Under Strain as Israel Pounds Gaza," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, October 26, 2023, https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/gulf-normalization-under-strain-as-israel-pounds-gaza/

⁷⁴ "Gulf States Pledge \$100 Million In 'Urgent' Aid For Gaza As War Intensifies," *NDTV World*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/israel-palestine-war-gulf-states-pledge-100-million-in-urgent-aid-for-gaza-as-war-intensifies-4490957>

⁷⁵ David Kenner, "Arab states expanded cooperation with Israeli military during Gaza war," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/10/11/us-israel-arab-military-leaked-documents/>

⁷⁶ "The US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza," *CNN*, December 9, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-12-08-23>

⁷⁷ Nadeen Ebrahim and Abbas Al Lawati, "The US allowed a Gaza ceasefire resolution to pass at the UN. What does that mean for the war?" *CNN*, March 27, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/26/middleeast/israel-gaza-ceasefire-un-resolution-war-impact-intl>

Egypt, who were working as mediators, signed the Gaza ceasefire agreement on October 13, 2025,⁷⁸ though the deal looks still fragile according to many observers. The peace deal reduced large-scale escalation; it did not bring a stabilised regional environment, influencing the conflict toward peace. In addition, Israel resumed its military escalation on Palestinian territory, particularly in the West Bank, which damaged trust and raised tension between the parties surrounding the peace process.⁷⁹ On November 22, 2025, 24 people had been killed through Israeli missile and drone attacks throughout northern and central Gaza,⁸⁰ although Israel claimed that it initiated the attack by following an attack on Israeli soldiers carried out by Hamas in Israeli territory.⁸¹ Similarly, Israel also continued its military attack on the other regions in the Middle East, including Lebanon, to counter the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, which was also a violation of the ceasefire between the parties signed in 2024 that complicated the Palestinian conflict. On December 4, 2025, Israel launched another deadly attack on Gaza, claiming that Hamas had attacked its soldiers, which further violated the ceasefire agreement.⁸² The GCC countries condemned the Israeli aggression, stating that it violated the ceasefire agreement, but did not take proactive steps.⁸³ On the other hand, Houthis' offensive strategy and their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea by early 2026 have also complicated the Middle Eastern politics, creating a connection to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Meanwhile, the 12-day Iran-Israel war in June 2025 also intensified regional tensions, taking world attention away from the Palestinian issue.⁸⁴ Thus, the GCC countries' stances on the Israel-Palestinian conflict were shaped by domestic, regional and external dynamics.

⁷⁸ Jacob Magid, "US sidelining Israel on decision-making at Gaza ceasefire HQ," *The Times of Israel*, November 8, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-sidelining-israel-on-decision-making-at-gaza-ceasefire-hq-official-says/>

⁷⁹ Justin Salhani, "Despite ceasefires, "Israel continues attacks around the region", *Aljazeera*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/27/despite-ceasefires-israel-continues-attacks-around-the-region>

⁸⁰ Stephen Quillen, Faisal Ali, Nils Adler and Farah Najjar, "Updates: Israel military launches wave of strikes on Gaza killing 24," *Aljazeera*, November 22, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/11/22/live-israel-3>

⁸¹ "Israel has violated Gaza truce nearly 500 times in 44 days, killed hundreds," *Aljazeera*, November 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/23/israel-has-violated-gaza-truce-nearly-500-times-in-44-days-killed-hundreds>

⁸² Adam Rasgon and Natan Odenheimer, "Deadly Attacks in Gaza Test Cease-Fire as Body of Another Captive Is Returned," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/04/world/middleeast/gaza-strikes-ceasefire.html>

⁸³ Jan Yumul, "GCC leaders reaffirm support for Palestine and Gaza truce at Bahrain meeting," *China Daily*, December 4, 2025, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202512/04/WS69319838a310d6866eb2cf11.html>

⁸⁴ "Israel attacks Iran: What we know so far," *Aljazeera*, June 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/13/israel-attacksiran-what-we-know-so-far?utm_source=chatgpt.com

4. The Domestic-Systemic Nexus: Outlining the GCC Countries' Responses Towards the Israel-Palestine Conflict

This section outlines the systemic pressures and domestic factors shaping GCC states' policies toward the Israel-Palestine conflict. This section comprises two subsections. Firstly, it examines systemic-level factors. Lastly, it analyses domestic and individual-level factors in tandem.

4.1 *Systemic-level Factors: Structural Constraints and Opportunities*

Unlike in the past, when the Gulf states maintained a hardline stance against Israel, there has been a noticeable shift towards a more conciliatory approach from the GCC countries towards Israel. The changes be partially attributed to some systemic factors, i.e. US' influence as a hegemon, Iran as a shared threat perception, fragmentation within the GCC's policy structure, distorted global conscience as a feeble collective systemic pressure, paradox of laggards vs. first responders' benefits, etc.

4.1.1 *US Hegemonic Influence as an Extra-Regional Actor*

The strategic patronage of the United States, particularly its security guarantees and diplomatic leverage, incentivises alignment with Washington's Middle East agenda, including normalisation with Israel. The United States, as a major external power, has significantly exacerbated the Arab-Israeli conflict through its extensive political, military, and financial support for Israel, thereby intertwining the conflict with rising anti-American sentiment. The US patronage has not followed a "one size fits all" approach for the GCC members, but rather has been customised to provide security assurance, incentives, and political support. Such a tailored approach was seen during the first Trump presidency, when Aviraahm Berkowitz and Jared Kushner were employed as personalised negotiators to carry on the top-down diplomatic approach to bypass the traditional bureaucratic channels to deal with the GCC leadership. In doing so, the US has been able to remove the bottlenecks of public and bureaucratic opposition of the GCC members towards the normalisation of relations with Israel. To sweeten the normalisation deal, the US had offered the UAE up to fifty F-35 stealth fighter jets and eighteen advanced MQ-9B Reaper drones under the Abraham Accords, making the latter the first-ever GCC member to receive such drones.⁸⁵ However, the deal was later cancelled due to strict US

⁸⁵ Chyrine Mezher, "MQ-9 Reapers to the UAE: Why Now?," *Breaking Defense*, November 24, 2020, <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/11/mq-9-reapers-to-the-uae-why-now/> ; GDC News, "UAE withdraws Lockheed's F-35 Deal with U.S.," *Global Defence Corp*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/2022/01/08/uae-withdraws-lockheeds-f-35-deal-with-the-u-s/>

security conditions, operational restrictions, and escalating concerns over the UAE's deepening relations with China (particularly involving Huawei 5G technology).⁸⁶ This outcome highlights a key limit of US patronage, i.e. its willingness to provide advanced weaponry is strictly preconditional and must align with the security priorities, especially regarding geopolitical contenders like China.⁸⁷ For those GCC members, the US could not offer any concrete military-security incentives; it instead provided crucial political cover, as a means of extending support, by using its superpower status to legitimise the normalisation and help leaders manage dissent at home and abroad.

The US strategically removed the major historical obstacle to normalisation—the Arab League's 2002 initiative that requires recognising Israel to the creation of a Palestinian state—by helping Gulf leaders bypass it.⁸⁸ This was achieved in two key ways: firstly, by brokering a concession from Israel to suspend its annexation plans in the West Bank,⁸⁹ which provided a credible diplomatic victory for a partner like the UAE to justify its policy shift. Lastly, by signalling through its own one-sided peace plan called 'Peace to Prosperity', the USA was not prioritising the two-state solution of the conflict,⁹⁰ which encouraged GCC states to decouple the relationship with Israel.

Under the Trump administration, the US acted as a conductor to forge a unified threat perception of Iran, using its 'maximum pressure' campaign to align with the security concerns of Israel and the Gulf Sunni monarchies.⁹¹ This strategy created a de facto alliance by framing normalisation as an urgent strategic imperative to counter Iranian influence, with the US positioning itself as the common security guarantor to provide a rationale for cooperation, while also promising that such normalisation would lead to enhanced trilateral military and intelligence sharing among the US, Israel, and the Gulf states against their common threat.

The US, as a hegemon, has exercised its power and offered customised offers for the GCC members and shaped the power politics of the region. The US

⁸⁶ Andrew Mills, "UAE does not plan to re-open F-35 fighter jet talks with US," *Reuters*, September 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uae-does-not-plan-re-open-f-35-fighter-jet-talks-with-us-uae-official-2024-09-14/>

⁸⁷ Amira El-Fekki, "Key US Ally Eyes Alternative to America's F-35 Jet," *Newsweek*, August 13, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-ally-eyes-alternative-america-f-35-2112656>

⁸⁸ Sung Chul Jung, "Democratization and Alliance Commitment: US Democratizing Allies during the Gulf War," *Armed Forces & Society* 39, no. 4 (2013): 654–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609156>.

⁸⁹ Kenneth Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, 23 December 2020.

⁹⁰ Ahmad Kilani, Mohammad Ali Alawieh, E V Mussaui-Ulianishcheva and L V Ulyanishcheva, "Peace to Prosperity Plan as a One State Solution," *Journal of Politics and Law* 13, no. 2 (2020): 94–100.

⁹¹ Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "President Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign and Iran's Endgame," *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 6 (2020): 570–82.

has offered itself as a patron and allowed itself to be a conduit for the normalisation, and absorbed the criticisms hurled at GCC and Israel. Thus, the GCC members are assured to get a political cover to shield themselves from public backlash. This allowed GCC members to navigate the contentious regional power dynamics and transforming landscape and manage their security concerns regarding external threats without solely bearing the political repercussions from home and abroad.

4. 1. 2 *Iran as a Shared Threat' Multiplier and Concomitant Systemic Pressure*

The GCC's collective securitisation of Iran as an existential threat fosters tacit or overt cooperation with Israel, seen as a tacit ally in countering Tehran's regional ambitions. Iran has been a perpetual threat to the collective consciousness of GCC members since the 1979 Iranian revolution.⁹² Other notable incidents and events towards the creation of Iran as an existential threat to the GCC members, which have induced systemic pressure on the latter, include but not limited to: territorial disputes and taking control of three Emirati islands; export of Iran's revolution and expand its influence among the GCC members; involvement in proxy networks (through supporting Hezbollah and the Houthis) in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon;⁹³ Iranian missile strikes on GCC members' key facilities (i.e. 2019 Saudi Aramco, 2025 Qatar's al-Udeid Air Base attacks);⁹⁴ proliferation of economical rocket, missile, mortars, naval mines,⁹⁵ and drone technologies; cyberattacks, Iran's nuclear program, to name a few.⁹⁶ The patronisation of regional Shia-affiliated armed groups, such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, has complicated the systemic pressures on the GCC members, adding another layer of complexity.

⁹² R K Ramazani, "Security in the Persian Gulf." *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 4 (1979): 827. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20040203>.

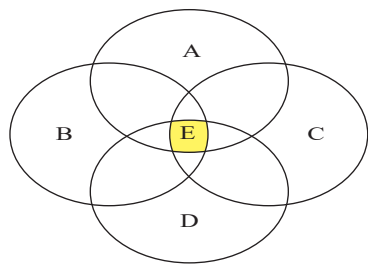
⁹³ Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks", Middle East Institute, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>.

⁹⁴ Hasan Alhasan, "Rebuilding GCC-Iran relations in the shadow of war," IISS, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/07/rebuilding-gcciran-relations-in-the-shadow-of-war/>

⁹⁵ "Abraham Accords treaties continue to promote defence cooperation in the Middle East", Army Technology, August 24, 2022, <https://www.army-technology.com/comment/abraham-accords-treaties-middle-east>.

⁹⁶ Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam. "The Abraham accords and Israel-UAE normalization," Chatham House, 84, 2023.

Figure 1: ‘Iran (and Its Supported Groups) as A Shared Threat’ Perception [A: Iran-Hezbollah-Houthis; B: GCC States; C: Israel; D: Other Actors Antagonistic To Iran; E: Common Areas That Could Affect Normalisation].



Source: Prepared by Authors

“Iran as a security threat” might have further exacerbated the potential for a collective escalation by GCC member states. A perceived threat of Iran, its regional aspirations, and close connections with Hezbollah and the Houthis, etc., have created systemic pressure on the GCC countries to shift towards a conciliatory approach towards Israel. Some observers noted that the presence of Iran and its ties with Hamas and other actors have made it difficult to strike a sustained peace “between Palestinians and Israelis”.⁹⁷ Iran cast a long shadow, whether be it positive or negative, on the systemic pressure spectrum of the GCC-Palestine-Israel equation. The increasing discernment of Iran as a security threat has directed the GCC countries to view Israel as a strategic partner in the region.⁹⁸ Therefore, the rise of Iran as a security threat has also augmented the insecurity perception of GCC countries, resulting in the normalisation of the relationship with Israel rather than earlier hostility.

4. 1. 3 *Fragmentation within the GCC's Policy Structure*

The diplomatic and political costs of normalization with Israel were lowered gradually through some treaties, i.e. 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, 1993 Oslo Accords, and 1994 Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty.⁹⁹ These developments have paved the way for further engagement with Israel, with more strategic benefits on the horizon. The changed geopolitical realities have ushered in a new arena where a normative/

⁹⁷ Greenblatt and Hook cited in Fakhro, Elham. *The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization*. Columbia University Press, 2024, 94.

⁹⁸ Yeon, “The Shifting Dynamics of Amity and Enmity in the Middle East.”

⁹⁹ Harb cited in Yeon, “The shifting dynamics of amity and enmity in the Middle East: analysing the 2023 Israel-Hamas war through the framework of regional security complex theory,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* (2025): 1-20.

ideational/moral position is no longer necessary for the GCC members. This allowed them to give up their previously held collective stand for the Palestinian cause. This permitted them to devise their own bilateral strategies, instead of following the old plan, on the basis of their diversified political interests.¹⁰⁰

A competitive situation is created where the GCC members feel compelled to foster ties and go for full normalisation with Israel on the basis of “First Responder Benefits”. The country which moves first potentially gains some strategic advantage over the laggards. These benefits are multifaceted, including, firstly, GCC states may have found it beneficial to forge a closer security and intelligence cooperation with Israel (and by extension, the United States) against a common adversary, Iran, potentially including advanced military technology and early warning systems. Secondly, another potential benefit might have been garnering favour with the US administration, which often acts as a broker for these deals, potentially translating into increased political support, arms sales, and security guarantees. Lastly, normalisation may create preferential access to Israeli innovation in key sectors like cybersecurity, fintech, agriculture, and water management, attracting investment and creating a competitive economic edge.

This dynamic generates a profound pressure on the other GCC states. Those who hesitate risk being “laggards”, left in a position of vulnerability. They may face a relative decline in their security capabilities, miss out on economic opportunities, and lose influence in the policy circle of US. The fear of being left behind in a rapidly realigning region, coupled with the demonstrated benefits reaped by the first movers (like the UAE and Bahrain following the Abraham Accords), thus creates a self-reinforcing cycle that encourages further normalisation, effectively breaking the old Arab consensus and replacing it with a new, interest-based calculus.

4. 1. 4 *Hamas’ Reactions as Impacts on First-level Factors*

The prospect of a monumental Saudi-Israeli normalisation deal, which promised to reconfigure the regional order, presented an existential threat to Hamas’s political relevance and strategic position. Isolated in the Gaza Strip and observing the gradual erosion of the Palestinian cause as a central Arab concern, the group calculated that its leverage was rapidly diminishing. A Saudi-Israeli accord would have marked the ultimate betrayal in Hamas’s view, effectively shattering remaining pan-Arab solidarity and permanently marginalising the Palestinian issue. This looming diplomatic breakthrough directly catalysed Hamas’s decision to launch the October 7th attack—a desperate, brutal gambit to shatter the status

¹⁰⁰ Vakil and Quilliam, “The Abraham accords and Israel–UAE normalization.”

quo, provoke a devastating Israeli response, and thereby torpedo the negotiations by forcing Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to publicly condemn Israel and retreat from normalisation in the face of overwhelming popular outrage. The attack was ultimately a violent assertion of agency designed to reclaim centre stage and ensure that the Palestinian question could not be so easily bypassed.

4. 1. 5 *Crooked Global Conscience as Collective Systemic Pressure*

The portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Western media is systematically shaped by theoretical and political forces that privilege certain narratives while silencing others.¹⁰¹ As established by Agenda-Setting Theory¹⁰² and Framing Theory,¹⁰³ the media does not tell audiences what to think, but rather what to think about—and does so through selective frames that define problems, assign blame, and imply solutions. These frames often align with powerful institutional interests. As argued by Chomsky and Herman, media filters routinely serve governmental and corporate agendas,¹⁰⁴ a dynamic clearly observable in coverage of Palestine.¹⁰⁵

This structural bias is further amplified by political pressure. Mearsheimer and Walt contend that well-organised and generously funded pro-Israel lobbying groups, such as AIPAC, exert significant influence over both political figures and media outlets in the United States.¹⁰⁶ Waxman, however, contended that the “Lobby” is not a monolithic identity, thus the influence is diverse and more complex than

¹⁰¹ Ahmad Hamad Kareem and Yaseen Mahmood Najm, “A critical discourse analysis of the biased role of western media in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” *Journal of Language Studies* 8, no. 6 (2024): 200-215.; Amir Shahzad, Ahsan Raza, Saleh Safer Abbasi, Farhan Ali, and Abid Ali. “International Media Discourses on The Israel–Palestine Conflict: A Comparative Analysis.” *Policy Research Journal* 3, no. 8 (2025): 565-578.; Amalie Kræmer, Anne Cecilie Overgaard, Elina Rutkovska, Fitore Zymberi, Jannik Christian Maass, Jarl Alexander Petersen, and Patricia Pommer Lundstrøm. “The Media’s Representation of the Israel-Palestine Conflict,” 2014.; Jordan Leclint, “Portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Regional Media Analysis of the use of framing in media coverage in Al Jazeera and Times of Israel of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 2019-2024,” 2025, <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/items/cdb3decf-bfa2-45be-887a-f8cc3d7694c>.

¹⁰² Maxwell E McCombs and Donald L Shaw. “The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas.” *Journal of communication* 43, no. 2 (1993): 58-67.; Maxwell E McCombs, Donald L Shaw, and David H Weaver, “New directions in agenda-setting theory and research.” in *Advances in foundational mass communication theories* (London: Routledge, 2018): 131-152.

¹⁰³ Robert M Entman, “Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm.” *McQuail’s reader in mass communication theory* 390 (1993): 397.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffery Klaehn, “A Critical Review and Assessment of Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model’.” *European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 2 (2002): 147-182.; Benjamin Long, “The role of the American corporate media in US policy: framing Hezbollah.” (2012).

¹⁰⁵ Hussein Al Ahmad, “The Political Echo in Pan-Arab Satellite TV News Media.”; Savanna Lynn Fowler, *Ideographs and American mass media: Understanding the narrative on the Israel-Palestine conflict and its influence on publics*. Illinois State University, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007): 96.

Mearsheimer and Walt noted.¹⁰⁷ This pressure encourages coverage, particularly from the Western domain that favours the Israeli state perspective and marginalises Palestinian narratives.¹⁰⁸

Such framings have significant consequences for the conflict. Scholars have noted a sustained silence in the media coverage of the conflict as the duration and extent of the Palestinian plights go decontextualised and unnoticed.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the systemic killings of the journalists have made it even more difficult for the masses to know.¹¹⁰ This has resulted in systematic failures to understand the Palestinian people's daily experiences, as on many occasions, BBC reporting neglected the critical humanitarian and historical setting and power dynamics.¹¹¹ Scholars contend that understanding Palestinian experiences is difficult due to the omission of realities about blockade, displacement, occupation and refugeehood.¹¹² By denouncing the humanitarian narratives mainstream media often portrays a reality devoid of objectivity and thus create a global public discourse that does not reflect the Palestinian plights.

Applying the Foucauldian lenses,¹¹³ we might say that a sort of productive power has been deployed to mute the plights of the Palestinians in the world media to avoid the other mainstream media, hence confining the GCC states as well as their responses. A combination of structured lobbying, ingrained cultural biases, and media framing practices systematically privileges the Israeli state's narrative over the Palestinian experience of occupation and displacement, which can be hypothesised

¹⁰⁷ Dov Waxman, "The pro-Israel lobby in the United States: Past, present, and future." In *Israel and the United States*, pp. 79-99. Routledge, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Kanyshai Butun, "Western coverage of Palestine remains structurally biased": Study," AA news, accessed on December 6, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/-western-coverage-of-palestine-remains-structurally-biased-study/3749496>

¹⁰⁹ Virgil Hawkins. "Peace and the absence of journalism," in *Communication and Peace: Mapping an emerging field*, ed. Julia Hoffmann, Virgil Hawkins (London: Routledge, 2015), 51-61; Virgil Hawkins, "Media selectivity and the other side of the CNN effect: The consequences of not paying attention to conflict," *Media, War & Conflict* 4, no. 1 (2011): 55-68.

¹¹⁰ "In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, journalism is 'both a battleground and a lifeline,'" *UN News*, December 1, 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/12/1166481>

¹¹¹ John E Richardson and Leon Barkho. "Reporting Israel/Palestine: Ethnographic insights into the verbal and visual rhetoric of BBC journalism," *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 5 (2009): 594-622.

¹¹² Greg Philo and Mike Berr, *More bad news from Israel* (Pluto Books, 2011); Des Freedman and Daya Thussu. "War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7," (2003): 1-266; Freedman, Des, and Daya Kishan Thussu, eds. *Media and terrorism: global perspectives*. Sage, 2011; Berry, Mike. "Reporting on contested territory: television news coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict." PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2004; John E Richardson, and Leon Barkho. "Reporting Israel/Palestine: Ethnographic insights into the verbal and visual rhetoric of BBC journalism," *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 5 (2009): 594-622.

¹¹³ Ismail Ayatullah Nasirudeen, Tolha Ayinde Yusuf and Monsurat Isiaka, "Biopower and Necropolitics in the Israel-Palestine Conflict: A Critical Analysis," *Ilorin Journal of Criminology and Security Studies* 2, no.1 (June 2024); Jan Busse, *Deconstructing the dynamics of world-societal order: The power of governmentality in Palestine* (London: Routledge, 2017).

as collective systemic pressure that might have persuaded GCC members to shift their responses to the Israel-Palestine conflict and strive for normalisation.

4. 2 *Domestic Level and Individual Leadership Factors*

This section discusses the individual and domestic-level factors to understand the GCC's transformation of responses towards the Israel-Palestine Conflict. Only a selective first and second level factors, i.e., leadership, agency, national interests, regime security, state capacity, Hamas' reaction as a factor, are outlined to analyse the transformation initiative on the part of the GCC members.

4. 2. 1 *Leadership and Agency: Changing Norms, Social Vs Practical Fits and New Pragmatic Nationalism*

The structure of political power in GCC states, where authority is highly concentrated in the hands of ruling monarchs and a small elite circle, grants leadership a significant degree of agency in foreign policy. This allows them to respond to systemic pressures (like the Iranian threat or US pressure) not as autonomous or whimsical, but as strategic actors who interpret, filter, and prioritise these pressures based on a calculated assessment of regime survival. Each GCC member interprets the normalisation and threat differently. The varying perception of the same threat (Iran) explains the variance in their approach to Israel. The first responders to normalisation have been the countries which have a high level of threat perception, i.e. Bahrain and UAE, and could exploit the strategic gains, US support, etc., push and pull factors.

The conflict is often translated as another 'political issue', not a 'moral/ideational/humanitarian cause' in its own right. However, paradoxically, there have been efforts to manage it through economic means, for example, the Peace to Prosperity Plan, instead of finding a permanent political solution, i.e. the two-state solution. The normalisation drive has been legitimised publicly by some GCC members as not a lack of empathy for the Palestinians, but rather as a forward-looking strategy for respective national gains. Thus, analysts could visualise a shift in perception or norms of the leadership of GCC members. The change is not only in the ultimate goal of regime survival or attaining one's own political goals but in the strategic norms used to achieve it. The systemic constraints may have pressurised the GCC leaders to shift the normative position from pan-Arab Muslim solidarity to pragmatic calculations, where respective leaders, national, regime, and/or state security interests are served. This shift in norms may seem perfectly aligned with the practical necessities, but it does not fit well socially.

4. 2. 2 *Regime Security, National Interests and State Capacity Calculations in Normalisation*

A key consideration in normalisation may be translated as to acquire Israeli and US technology, intelligence or any other suitable assistance. The potential materialistic carrots can be, but not limited to, drone defence systems, cyber-surveillance tools, other military-security equipment and intelligence sharing. These could be exploited to deter regional threats coming from Iran and its associated groups in the region, and possibly to monitor and suppress internal groups critical of the regimes in the GCC grouping. The GCC leaders have used their monarchic agencies to put more weight on securing regime, national, and state interests instead of following old norms.

Regime security calculation is impacted by bandwagoning as well. By aligning with Israel (a much stronger military power and Iran's arch-enemy), Bahrain and other GCC states are bandwagoning to counter Iranian influence. This enhances their external security, which is a core component of overall regime and/or state security. Normalisation is also a way to bandwagon with the United States. By complying with a key US foreign policy objective, they ensure continued American military support and political cover, which is the ultimate guarantor of most GCC regimes' security.

The reproachment can also be conceived as an instrument to advance their respective interests. The pragmatic cost-benefit calculations may have impacted their decision in getting state-of-the-art military technology, improved military and security cooperation against the Iran-Houthis-Hezbollah threat. These can be utilised as a springboard for further closer ties with Israel and the USA, particularly advancing regime security, economic opportunities and diversification of the economy. They could translate such advancements as ensuring regional stability based on securing national interests and a transformation of a long-held taboo, by sacrificing a sustained ideational/moral commitment.

Finally, the issue of reproachment is also contingent on assessing the superior military might of Israel, along with the perceived Iran-Houthis-Hezbollah threat factor. The GCC's militaries are thought to be no match to Israel and Iran-Houthis-Hezbollah's battle-tested military might. This gap is furthered by other immaterial shortcomings in regional, global leadership and diplomacy in international institutions. The limitations within the state capacities have been understood as an important variable in challenging Israel and/or Iran-Houthis-Hezbollah as threats. Thus, they remained more cautious over gaps in respective state capacities in assessing national survival, safety and security than continuing robust roles for the Palestinian cause.

4. 2. 3 *Internal Politico-societal Challenges*

GCC countries' internal politico-social constraints have restricted their rules of engagement with Israel over the decades. The full reconciliation could not be realised from the GCC members due to their populations being sympathetic towards the Palestinian plights. This has been the case for Kuwait. Such domestic uproars forced some of the GCC members to hedge between provoking public outbursts stemming from full reconciliation and giving up the fight for Palestinian statehood, and pragmatic calculations. The recent Israeli genocidal war has resulted in creating a breathing space for the GCC countries. Now, the GCC members are faced with a dilemma: they have to take into consideration the popular feelings on one hand and have to move cautiously with pragmatic manoeuvres of fostering ties with the USA and normalisation with Israel. This ongoing tension highlights that while monarchic agency can initiate foreign policy shifts, it remains perpetually vulnerable to the constraints of public sentiment and societal solidarity.

4. 2. 4 *Leadership Factors among the GCC Members*

Some individual leaders of the GCC perceived this as an opportunity and had the agency to act. Of the six members of GCC, two have signed the Abraham Accords, namely, the UAE and Bahrain. The leaders of Bahrain and the UAE justified their decision by redefining domestic interests (regime security, economic gain) over ideological constraints. The leaders of these signatories traded off normalisation of ties with Israel in exchange for Israel forgoing the demand of sovereignty in the West Bank.¹¹⁴ Their action then altered the systemic environment itself, further fragmenting GCC policy and increasing the pressure on non-signatory states like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and others, and whose leaders must now process the new systemic reality through their own potent domestic filters (public opinion, parliament, etc.). The normalising states defended their agreements as a new avenue to promote Palestinian interests, while Palestinians and their allies condemned the move as a betrayal of their cause for national self-determination. The October 7th attacks severely chilled the once-vibrant business and diplomatic thaw between the UAE and Israel. However, following the Abraham Accords, the two states had moved rapidly to solidify ties: establishing formal relations, eliminating visa requirements, launching direct flights, and signing a comprehensive economic partnership. These measures successfully fueled bilateral trade and tourism, primarily from Israel to the UAE, with ambitious goals to increase annual trade from US\$ 2.5 billion in 2022 to US\$ 10 billion by 2027.¹¹⁵ However, amid the most recent West Bank annexation by Israel and war on

¹¹⁴ "West Bank annexation could end Israeli normalization hopes, Saudi crown prince warns – KAN," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-866569>.

¹¹⁵ Alexandre Kateb, "The Abraham Accords After Gaza: A Change of Context," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed on December 6, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/the-abraham-accords-after-gaza-a-change-of-context?lang=en>

Palestine, UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed issued another warning that the act would be a red flag to jeopardise the normalisation effort and withdrawal of itself from the Accords. For Bahrain, the relationship with Israel is primarily strategic, not economic. While it made history in 2022 by concluding the first official security pact between Israel and a GCC member, bilateral trade was negligible. Since the Gaza war began, Manama has maintained its position within the Abraham Accords, choosing to highlight indispensable security ties—such as intelligence training and drone purchases from Israel—even after recalling its ambassador and condemning the war.

As of September 2025, Saudi Arabia has not yet signed the Accords, and the recent Annexation plan was also rejected by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as it “would end any chance of normalisation”.¹¹⁶ In the fall of 2022, indicators suggested that Israel and Saudi Arabia were on the verge of a normalisation agreement.¹¹⁷ Saudi Arabia held the most agency of any member but also faced the greatest constraints due to its custodianship of Islam’s holiest sites. Prince Salman personally saw the strategic opportunity and was likely personally inclined to normalise. However, he could not act overtly without a significant concession for the Palestinians, a red line held firmly by King Salman. Saudi-Israeli normalisation, once imminent, is now paused indefinitely due to the recent genocidal war of Israel on Palestinians. The kingdom has firmly tied any resumption of talks to the creation of a Palestinian state or a credible path to achieve it.

Thus, we could see that the responses were not uniform in the GCC members’ decision-making calculus. Initially, the prospects were higher for some pro-Accords states (for instance the UAE and Bahrain), some have played cautious moves and sat on the fence (for instance Saudi Arabia and Qatar), as Israel’s commitments faltered and its policy of non-annexation deteriorated and resulted in subsequent genocidal war, the GCC members vocally cautioned that these are red flags and would result in total collapse of the Abraham Accords. Notwithstanding the severe challenges posed by the war, the architecture of the Abraham Accords endures. While parties have issued strong verbal condemnations and even threatened withdrawal, none have followed through with formal abrogation of the agreements. Therefore, the leadership factors did not play a decisive role in normalisation efforts, but rather dwindled and shifted according to the external systemic constraints or inputs.

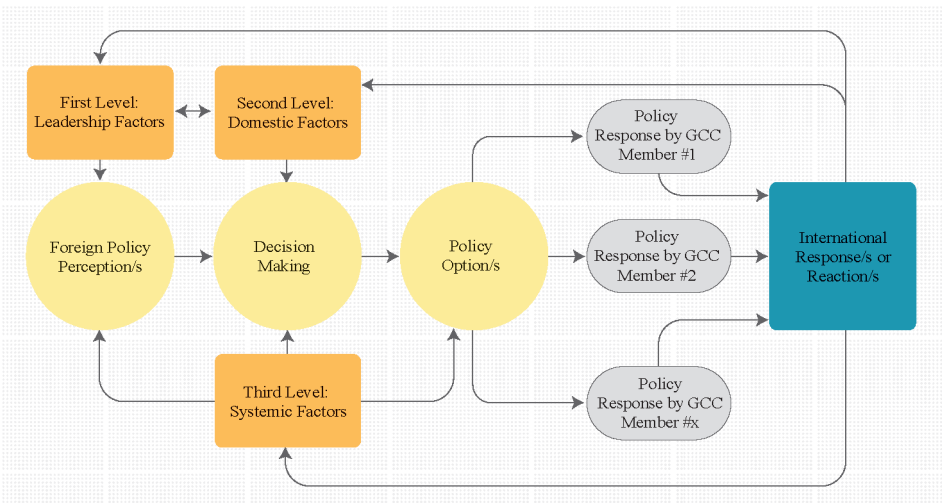
¹¹⁶ “West Bank annexation could end Israeli normalization hopes, Saudi crown prince warns – KAN,” *The Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-866569>

¹¹⁷ Tzvi Joffe, “Four years after the Abraham Accords, are the agreements falling apart?” *Unpacked*, accessed on December 6, 2025, <https://unpacked.media/four-years-after-the-abraham-accords-are-the-agreements-falling-apart/>

5. Neoclassical Realist Paradigm: Explanation of how the three levels interacted

This section explores how the mediation of the factors illustrated in section four accounts for divergent foreign policy responses. By applying neoclassical realism, we can explain the transformation from Pan-Arab consensus to pragmatic normalisation. It can be argued that while systemic pressures created the opportunity for normalisation, domestic and individual-level factors within each GCC state ultimately determined the timing, nature, and extent of their engagement with Israel.

Figure 2: Foreign Policy Decision Making Continuum of the GCC Member States According to Neoclassical Realism (x is a positive number indicating other members of the GCC).



Source: Prepared by Authors

The third level created a powerful permissive systemic environment and set clear incentives for a policy shift. The US acted as the primary systemic driver and deal broker, using its hegemonic power to offer carrots (deals, security guarantees etc.) and reshape threat perceptions (against Iran-Houthis-Hezbollah). The Iranian threat provided a compelling strategic rationale, redefining Israel from an adversary to a potential partner in a balance-of-power struggle. The fragmented Arab consensus lowered the diplomatic costs of breaking ranks and created a competitive dynamic situation where states feared being left behind. In short, the systemic factors have contributed to a strong “why now” and a “why it’s feasible” logics behind the GCC-Israel normalisation.

The foreign policy responses of the GCC members are diverse, as the second level explains. The third-level factors could not usher in a unified response from them

as they were conditioned by the unique internal constraints for each of the states. The first responders, Bahrain and UAE, were the states which were seemed to be the most vulnerable. Economic, political, and security calculations have influenced their decision spectrum. The hesitant actors, i.e. Kuwait, have been cautious about rapprochement due to strong political and religious connections. The systemic inputs were more restricted for the latter case as the internal variable filter was seen to be more aligned towards long-held ideological position. This level extrapolated why some GCC countries are keener for rapprochement, others sit on the fence, and the rest are adamant for that end.

The individual level exemplified the leadership factors, such as having agency to drive the decision to change. The leadership factors for our case illustrate that they are monarchic and small in number. They could translate as per their worldviews and could translate the systemic constraints as per their sweet will. For instance, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed understood the shift as an avenue for securing national, regime, and state gains.

Others may have perceived the same factors but weighed the domestic risks more heavily. Others might have wanted to see how far Israel manages to keep its promises and thus make normalisation contingent on Palestinian statehood as a political solution. These leaders actively framed the policy shift, constructing a new narrative of “pragmatic nationalism” to replace the old norm of “pan-Arab solidarity” to justify their actions both domestically, regionally and internationally. The October 7th attack is a crucial example of a non-state actor’s leadership (a first-level factor) directly intervening to alter the calculus at all other levels. It was a violent attempt to change the systemic and domestic filters, making the cost of normalisation prohibitively high for the Arab leaders by inflaming public opinion. This level explains “who made the decision and how they tried to operationalise it”.

The interaction of these levels is not linear but dynamic and iterative. Systemic pressures (US influence, Iranian etc. threat) created a strong incentive for normalisation. Individual leaders (in the UAE, Bahrain) perceived this as an opportunity and had the agency to act. They justified their decision by redefining domestic interests (regime security, economic gain etc.) over ideological constraints (Palestinian statehood). Their action then altered the systemic environment itself, further fragmenting GCC policy and increasing the pressure on “non-signatories” states like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, whose leaders must now process the new systemic reality, i.e. a genocidal war and Israeli fresh annexation, through their own potent domestic filters (public opinion, parliament, popular protests etc.). The case of GCC normalisation is a textbook example of neoclassical realism: systemic factors set the stage, but unit-level variables (first and second level constraints) write the script and determine the rules of the game and pace of the play.

This theoretical lens extrapolates that GCC foreign policies are neither idiosyncratic nor it is guided by the international systemic factors. Rather, the diversity in the foreign policies of the GCC members results from the factor of how leaders of these regimes translate the structural constraints through the complex formula of state security and regime survival. The study finds that neoclassical realism is beneficial in understanding the changing geopolitical reality and different actors' behaviours and decisions, particularly for a complex conflict, especially the Israel-Palestine one.

6. Conclusion

The article deliberated, by applying neoclassical realism, that the foreign policy responses of the GCC countries towards the Israel-Palestine conflict are neither unidirectional nor monolithic in nature. There is no preponderance of one single factor, nor one single level of the levels of analysis. Rather, these are concomitantly produced by a complex, unavoidable interaction of domestic-level factors and diversified systemic pressures. Hence, the normalisation with Israel while supporting Palestinian statehood has remained an enigma puzzle for the GCC countries.

Neoclassical realism provides a portal to gain insights into the gap in existing literature by portraying how the systemic constraints set the course of actions, while the domestic/unit-level factors, i.e. internal politico-social constraints, leadership, state capacity, regime security considerations, etc., function as mediating factors in shaping GCC members' deviating and unique policy trajectories.

Systemic pressures, notably shared securitisation of Iran as an existential threat and the US hegemonic influence, created a conducive environment and a compelling strategic rationale for GCC-Israel normalisation. This redefined Israel from a historical adversary into a potential strategic partner in a regional balance-of-power spectrum. Concurrently, the fragmentation of the pan-Arab consensus and the competitive allure of 'first-responder benefits' lowered the diplomatic costs of engagement, incentivising a shift from collective Arab solidarity for the Palestinian statehood to individualised national interest calculations.

The systemic factors do not translate into GCC members' foreign policies in isolation, as the neoclassical realism illustrated in the previous section. Rather, those are mediated by the domestic constraints and thus the former are translated as partially as influencing variables by individual GCC members. The changed decision on normalisation question was carried easily and boldly by the leadership initially due to the regime's monarchic nature, as has been the cases for Bahrain and

UAE. The leaderships that favoured rapprochement realigned their national interests on the basis of pragmatic calculations, and rebranded the initiative as beneficial for different gains ranging from technological to security areas. While some other GCC members, namely, Qatar and Kuwait, have maintained a cautious stand due to a wide variety of internal and external constraints. The Hamas offensive on 7 October turned the tide of the top-down US strategic pressure upside down and put the GCC-Israel normalisation drive in a limbo, as the GCC members now have to maintain a delicate balancing act between moral outrage and pragmatic calculations.

It can be concluded that the GCC states' foreign policy positions have shifted over the years from a normative stance of pan-Arabism to pragmatic calculations. The third-level factors suggested that normalisation with Israel has potentially become a lucrative strategic option for the GCC members; however, individual leadership considerations and domestic and regional constraints have ushered in a black-box phenomenon behind explaining the paradox.

The findings portrayed that for middle powers like the GCC members, foreign policy is a continuum of delicate navigation between the demands of a constraining anarchic environment at the third level and the imperatives of domestic legitimacy and regime survival at the first and second levels. The future of GCC-Israel relations, and by extension the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, will continue to be contingent on this unstable yet definitive bridge between the systemic and the domestic variables. However, a single theory, such as neoclassical realism, is not sufficient to explain the complex dynamics of Middle Eastern politics and the stances of the GCC states on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Future research could examine the positions of GCC countries regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict through the application of different theoretical frameworks. In addition, it is noted that GCC states have also adopted varied and distinct policy approaches, particularly concerning strategic and security issues. In this context, future research could also examine how intra-GCC rivalries and differing policies influence the divergence of member states' positions on the Israel-Palestine conflict.