

*Commentary*

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR A GCC-IRAN NON-AGGRESSION PACT

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In a scale unprecedented since the Gulf War of 1990, the recent hostilities between the United States (US), Israel, and Iran have undermined the confidence and security of each and every Arab Gulf state. It may have been Israel and the US that started the war, but it was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states who served as the unwilling front line in the conflict. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was targeted far more frequently than Israel over the first forty days of war. After the April ceasefire was declared, Iran kept attacking the Gulf states, shifting its focus to primarily target Bahrain and Kuwait in order to pressure the US to make concessions. All this took place despite the GCC states lobbying Washington against attacking Iran and the recent warming of relations between Tehran and many of the Gulf states.

The long-standing security relationship with the US remains indispensable for the Gulf states. However, the US has demonstrated its willingness to agree to a deal with Iran at almost any price. This illustrates that it is the Gulf states – rather than an external security guarantor – who can best advance their own national and collective interests against an emboldened Iran or any other regional spoiler. The recent US-Iranian Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) suggests that the GCC states may need to make the difficult decision to pursue a collective non-aggression pact with Iran. The MOU remains brittle, meaning that a resumption of hostilities between the US, Iran, and Israel in the near future remains eminently possible. It is thus exigent for the Gulf states to pursue complementary options to extricate themselves from the firing line to advance their collective and national interests, rather than waiting for either their rivals or their partners to decide the region's fate.

## THE US IS PASSING THE BUCK

The terms of the MOU suggest that it heavily favors Tehran's demands. The US will commit to sanctions relief and allow Iran to sell its oil if Tehran stops attacking and threatening ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz. The difficult questions remain unresolved: Iran's relations with its proxies, its destabilizing and revisionist grand strategy, its ballistic missile stockpile, and, last but not least, its nuclear program have all been deferred to a later date. In short, Iran's wartime control over the Strait of Hormuz has now allowed it to get what it wants without having to concede on any of the pre-war negotiating sticking points.

In contrast to an emboldened Iran, the Trump administration appears to have lost its appetite for conflict. The US committed to stopping any conflict spillovers to Lebanon in the MOU, but the document makes no similar references to the Gulf states. Worse still, President Trump's statements in his last G7 press conference appeared to hint that the Gulf states should take the lead or share the burden of negotiations with Iran on its offensive arsenal and proxy network, distancing the US from such objectives.

This illustrates that the Gulf states and the US may be allies but do not always share overlapping interests. It also presents an opportunity that the Gulf states should take: using President Trump's apparent blessing to negotiate with Tehran to advance their own interests and make a future attack less likely.

## THE GULF'S PREFERENCE FOR DIPLOMACY

This strategy would conform to existing Gulf strategic cultures. Even though Iran attacked cities and critical infrastructure throughout the GCC, the Gulf states exercised restraint and maintained a defensive posture to varying degrees. Gulf capitals primarily chose to respond to Iranian aggression with condemnations and resolutions in multilateral institutions. The hope may have been that by overtly staying out of the conflict, the Gulf states could avoid a scenario where they are left to clear up the Americans' mess by fighting a war not of their choosing when the US decides to disengage, a scenario the MOU now hints at.

The statement from the GCC's ministerial meeting on June 10 places the burden of goodwill on Iran but also carries an important message: the door to diplomacy has not closed. In fact, the statement reiterated the Gulf states' "commitment to the option of peace, good neighbourliness and diplomatic solutions." They also posed an important question to Iran: "how can future relations be built amid the continuation of these attacks and the insistence on pursuing them? Persistence in the path of aggression will only lead to further isolation, while the door to understanding remains open to those who choose the language of wisdom and good neighbourliness." When the MOU was signed, most of the Gulf countries' diplomatic statements that followed reiterated that same message: there is a need to restore good neighborliness and regional security. Indeed, Qatar's intense involvement in mediating the MOU exemplifies that the GCC states are doubling down on diplomacy.

## THE STRENGTH OF A PAN-GULF APPROACH

A GCC-Iran pact would require the Gulf states to prepare a unified front on external political negotiations, which is not a given – even through the GCC institution. Given the sensitivity of the issue, the GCC Secretariat may not have the institutional capacity to develop such a front, unlike in the institution's various successful trade agreements. While the GCC Secretary-General boasted a "high level of coordination among the Council states in addressing the repercussions of the Iranian aggressions through holding more than 150 extraordinary meetings across all ministerial and technical levels," the Gulf states have not presented a united stance since the conflict began. Oman continued hosting the Iranian foreign minister for talks, while Bahrain has not had diplomatic relations with Iran for nearly a decade, and the UAE closed its embassy

in Tehran after recent attacks began. The rest of the Gulf countries declared some diplomats *personae non gratae* but did not escalate further.

A collective non-aggression pact with Iran would have a primary benefit: it could bring the GCC closer together on collective security threats and work towards promoting unity. It would not preclude inter-Gulf divergences on other issues. Yet, it would promote collective security whilst being realistic in seeking the minimum threshold required to maintain a credible collective pact against a shared threat. It could, for instance, promote intelligence sharing and military and civil defense coordination vis-à-vis Iran. This makes sense given the close proximity of Gulf states to each other; if Iranian missiles and drones take to the skies again, the GCC states should coordinate more closely on tracking and interception – if only to deter such a pact from breaking.

In sum, the optimal scenario would be a pan-GCC agreement with Iran. This could then set a minimum baseline that Gulf capitals could build on through bilateral relationships. It would allow the GCC to demonstrate unity and collective bargaining strength, whilst permitting flexibility for each individual Gulf state to expand relations with Iran if it so wishes.

A non-aggression pact would be a breakthrough. The most notable meeting so far between the GCC and Iran was in Doha on October 3, 2024. According to Dr Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, the bloc's assistant secretary-general for political affairs and negotiation, this was the “first known gathering between Iran and GCC foreign ministers as a group.” This historic meeting came after several crises in Gulf-Iranian relations that began with the Houthi takeover of Yemen and escalated to Houthi, and possibly even Iranian, attacks on Saudi and UAE-flagged tankers, infrastructure, and airports. This time, the damage done – both physical and to Iran's reputation – is, of course, far higher. But it does illustrate that diplomacy and relative GCC unity alike are possible in the aftermath of crisis.

## CONCLUSION

The GCC has time to set the groundwork for such a pact ahead of its next standard annual summit, likely in December 2026. The GCC's current president is Bahrain, and the Kingdom has already embraced the opportunity for greater GCC coordination in a royal letter presented in the bloc's latest ministerial meeting. The press release states it reflected “the vision of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa for achieving greater coordination, integration, and connectivity among GCC member states across all sectors within the framework of the GCC Charter, while reinforcing a unified Gulf position in support of peace and good neighbourly relations.” This suggests that even Bahrain, a GCC state often seen as relatively hawkish on Iran with a higher level of grievances compared to its fellow member states, prefers a collective solution to

the Iran problem.

Considering the understandable lack of trust in Tehran's intentions or declarations, this may well be Iran's last chance to reach an agreement with the GCC states. For now, it requires the Gulf capitals to be prepared to negotiate collectively and for Iran to knock on their doors with a sign of goodwill. While Iran may be more emboldened, it also understands the importance of reaching a regional understanding. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi clearly brought regional dialogue back on the agenda in a [call](#) with his Kuwaiti counterpart after the signing of the MOU with the US. All of this does not, of course, mean that a collective non-aggression agreement with Tehran is infallible, nor will it definitively insulate the GCC states against further Iranian attacks – or vice versa – if hostilities resume. It simply means diplomacy could be given a chance to set red lines.

## About the Authors



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