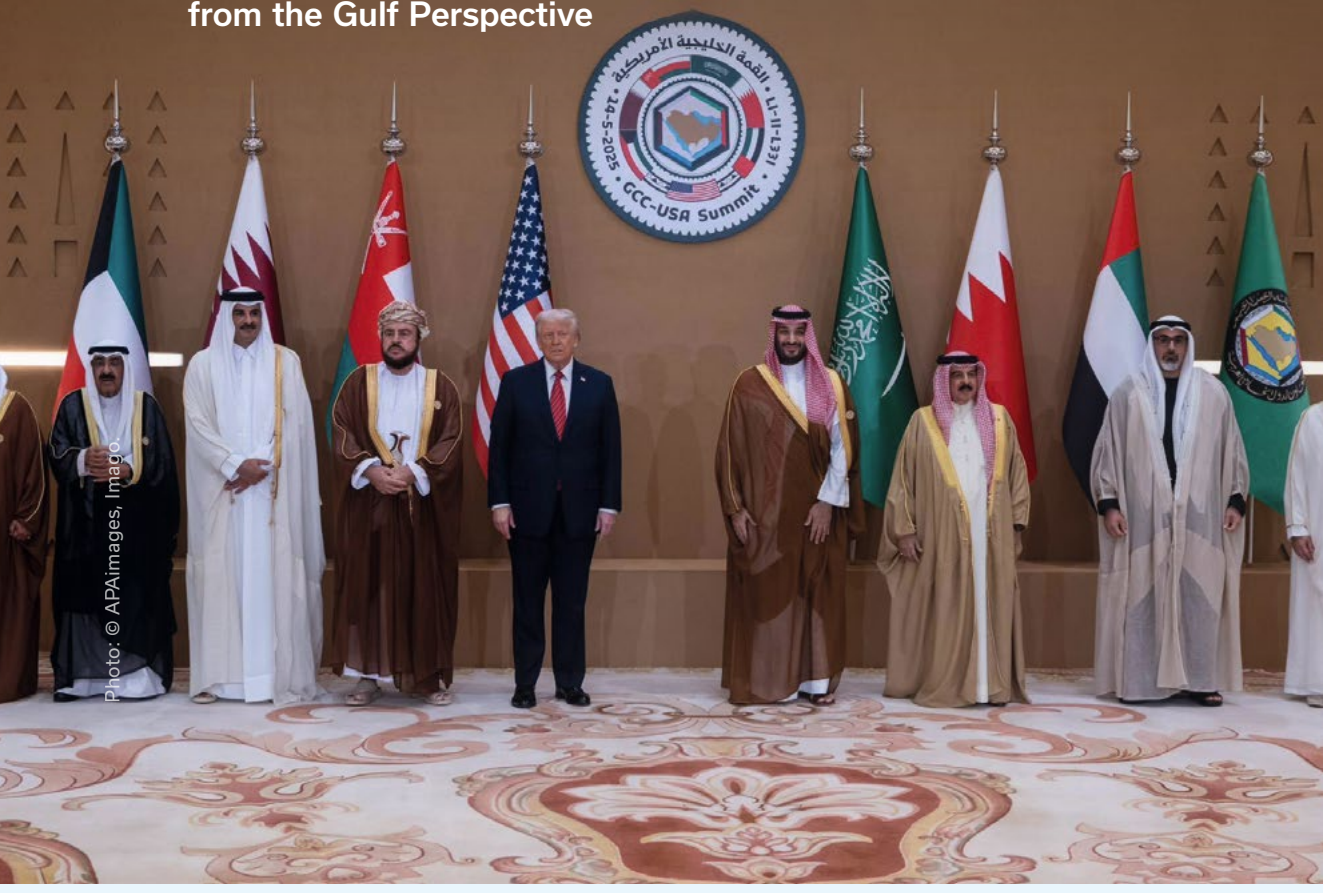
Honeymoon and Black Eyes

The First Year of Trump's Second Term from the Gulf Perspective



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In a Nutshell

Donald Trump was initially welcomed by the Gulf states as a harbinger of peace and economic cooperation. Personal ties with regional leaders and preferential economic arrangements strengthened confidence during the beginning of his second term. The US elevated the diplomatic status of the GCC states and granted them access to AI technology and defence equipment.

However, military escalations in Gaza, Yemen, and Iran – and above all, Israel's attack on Qatar – shook the region's sense of security and undermined faith in US security guarantees.

Strategic differences emerged: While Trump pursued confrontation with Iran and sought to expand the Abraham Accords, the Gulf states adopted a policy of de-escalation towards Tehran and demanded progress on the Palestinian issue.

The limits of personal diplomacy were laid bare. Despite their close ties to the White House, the GCC countries struggle to influence key decisions. While the Gaza peace deal marked an uptick in Gulf–US relations, Europe could benefit from their mixed track record by deepening its own strategic engagement with the Gulf.

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When asked during the 2024 US election campaign which candidate they would prefer to see win, representatives of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states – namely Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – responded with formal neutrality, insisting they could work well with either Democrats or Republicans. Behind the diplomatic phrasing lay a clear preference, however: Donald Trump.

After years of friction with Barack Obama over his Iran policy and criticism of the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen, relations with Joe Biden also remained cool. During his election campaign, Biden branded Saudi Arabia a "pariah state" following the killing of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi – a stance that left lasting resentment despite later efforts to mend ties.[1] Many in the region feared a similarly strained relationship under Democratic candidate and Vice President Kamala Harris.

Donald Trump was a different story. In his first term, he courted Saudi Arabia and the UAE with zeal. His first foreign trip as President took him to Riyadh, where he avoided any talk of human rights or democracy and instead stood firmly by the kingdom amid the international outrage over the Khashoggi affair.[2] Other GCC countries had more of a mixed experience with Trump. Qatar – blockaded by its neighbours during Trump's first term – was initially criticised by the US President before he shifted his stance, reportedly at the urging of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster. Overall, however, the Gulf's assessment of Trump's first term was positive.

Contrasting starkly with the formal diplomacy of Obama and Biden, Trump's leadership style found ready favour in the Gulf. He cultivated personal relations with key figures such as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and then-Crown Prince of the UAE Mohammed bin Zayed – a perfect match for the region's highly personalised political culture. As a self-styled deal-maker, Trump fit comfortably into the Gulf's traditional politics of handshake negotiations. Members of his inner circle also maintained close ties with the GCC states. Above all, his son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner became the driving force behind the Abraham Accords – that is, the normalisation agreements between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain that marked the signature foreign-policy success of Trump's first term.

Trump the "peacemaker" as a figure of hope

These close connections did not end with Trump's 2020 election defeat: Indeed, they were quickly revived during his 2024 campaign.[3] Unlike Kamala Harris, who largely ignored the region, Trump reached out early and deliberately to the Gulf states.[4] In October 2024, he gave his only international television interview to Saudi Arabia's state broadcaster Al Arabiya, praising Mohammed bin Salman as "a visionary" and promising to end the Gaza war immediately upon his return to office.[5]

In so doing, the US President astutely addressed one of the GCC countries' core concerns: Across the Gulf, nothing was more keenly desired than stability in the conflict-ridden neighbourhood. The war in Gaza – which broke out after the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 – only deepened fears of being drawn into yet another escalating confrontation. From the Gulf states' perspective, ending Israel's military campaign in Gaza was the top priority for restoring regional stability.

Trump's earlier pledge to bring an end to the "forever wars" of the Middle East still resonated strongly across the region. By contrast, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Doha grew increasingly frustrated with Biden, whom they saw as unable to stop the fighting in Gaza – a view that also extended to Vice President Harris. The prospect of another staunch supporter of Israel entering the White House was regarded not as a drawback, but rather as an advantage. In their eyes, Trump's unorthodox negotiating style and relentless drive to strike deals made him the only leader capable of pressing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to end the war.

Trump was beyond doubt the preferred candidate of the Gulf rulers – a familiar figure with whom they knew how to do business, and the only one they trusted to achieve a settlement in the Middle East. Moreover, if persuasion proved necessary, the Gulf rulers believed the businessman-President could be won over with promises of investment and lucrative deals for himself and his family. Thus, it came as no surprise that Trump's first congratulatory messages on election night stemmed from the Gulf. Indeed, his very first phone call as newly inaugurated President in January 2025 was with none other than Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.[6]

The harmony between the Gulf rulers and the US President paid off economically for the GCC states.

Honeymoon in the Gulf

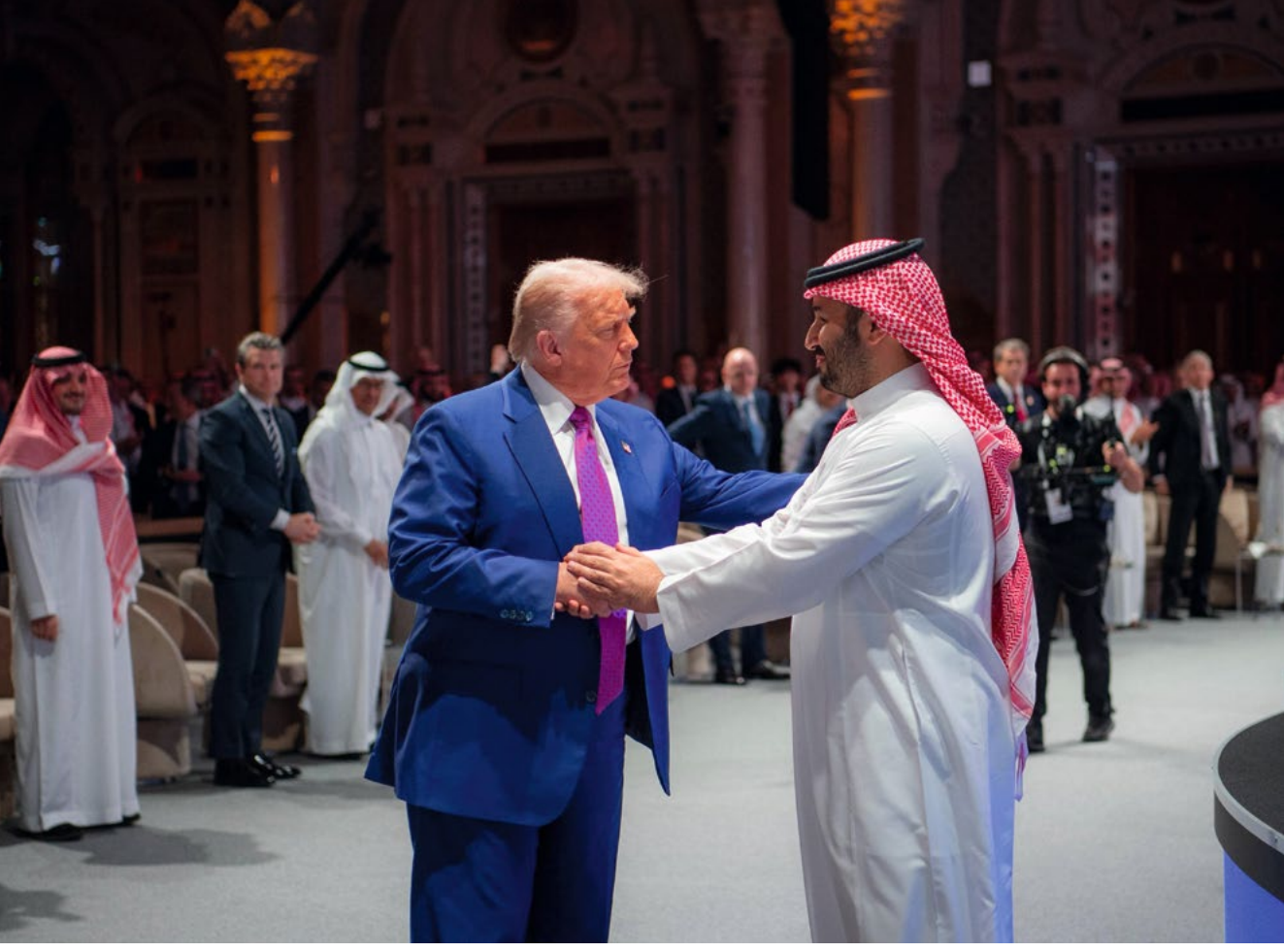
At first, it seemed as though Trump would deliver on all the hopes invested in him by the Gulf states. From peace initiatives to trade deals, the new US administration delivered everything the GCC countries had wished for, and in rapid succession.

Already during the transition period, Trump's new Middle East envoy and Jared Kushner's successor – Steve Witkoff – brokered a two-month ceasefire in Gaza that took effect the day before Trump was sworn in. Conversely, the White House elevated the Gulf states as key mediators in Trump's broader peace initiatives. Washington relied not only on Qatar and Oman as key intermediaries in regional negotiations, but also on Saudi Arabia, which hosted four separate rounds of peace talks between Russian and Ukrainian delegations that were attended by President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov.

Economically in particular, the harmony between the Gulf rulers and the US President proved highly profitable for the GCC states. While most of the world was hit with steep tariffs, the Gulf monarchies were charged the minimum rate of just ten per cent. Oil and gas exports – which make up the bulk of GCC trade with the US – were completely exempt, even if the region's overall trade volume with Washington remains relatively modest.[7]

Trump's state visit to the Gulf proved equally lucrative. As in 2017, his first major foreign trip of the new term took him to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. At investment conferences and state receptions, Gulf leaders courted the US President with lavish gifts and promises totalling 2.2 trillion US dollars, in return securing privileged access to hundreds of thousands of US AI chips. While other countries face strict export restrictions, the Gulf states – in the midst of diversifying their economies away from oil and gas – could use this opportunity to build their still-nascent AI industries into world-leading sectors. Trump also signed off on nearly 200 billion US dollars' worth of arms deals during the trip, supplying the GCC members with virtually everything they requested for their defence. Upon closer inspection, however, the Gulf's grand pledges to invest in the US often turned out to be the opposite: multi-billion-dollar investments by US firms in Gulf economies.[8]

Still, Trump's visit was notable not only for its economic gains, but also for its diplomatic outcomes. Although the new US administration was



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcomes President Donald Trump during the Saudi-US Investment Forum in Riyadh in May 2025. Photo: © UPI Photo, Imago.

initially sceptical of Syria's new leader – Ahmed al-Sharaa – following the end of the civil war, Mohammed bin Salman – who had placed his hopes in al-Sharaa's leadership and in the stabilising effect of rebuilding the neighbouring country – managed to persuade Donald Trump to soften his stance during the President's visit to Riyadh. By lifting its sanctions on Syria, the US cleared the way for extensive Gulf involvement in the country's reconstruction, fully in line with the region's political ambitions.

Even on sensitive issues, the GCC member states appeared able to win over the often-headstrong US President and to extract concessions that served their interests. The way in which Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman along with Mohammed bin Zayed – current President of the UAE – and Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad cultivated personal friendships with Trump was unparalleled anywhere in the world.

What is more troubling, however, is that their most effective strategy went beyond flattery: Indeed, it also involved substantial investments by the Gulf states in Trump's businesses and inner circle. With a total of seven Trump-branded hotels, towers, and golf courses across four countries, the Gulf region was more deeply entwined with the President's corporate empire than almost any other part of the world.[9] In addition, Abu Dhabi channelled billions into the investment fund operated by Trump's AI adviser David Sacks and also into a cryptocurrency company run by Trump's and Witkoff's sons – all while their fathers simultaneously advanced generous business deals with the Emirates.[10]

The fact that the Gulf monarchies so openly enabled the self-enrichment of Trump and his entourage is open to criticism. However, their close personal and commercial ties to the US President clearly afforded them political latitude in the early months of Trump's second term that other nations could only envy.

Growing disillusionment among the Gulf states

The positive momentum in US–Gulf relations soon faded, however. Not only did Witkoff's shuttle diplomacy for easing regional crises quickly lose traction, but the economic deals – the high point of Trump's state visit to the Gulf – were soon overshadowed by a series of geopolitical shocks.

The Gaza ceasefire temporarily reassured the GCC members, but when it collapsed in February, anxiety about renewed instability in the region surged once again, including on the Arabian Peninsula. Despite the high hopes pinned on Trump as a deal- and peacemaker, the new administration in Washington proved unable to contain the cycle of escalation in the Middle East over the spring and summer.

Worse still, it was the US itself that helped draw crises and conflicts ever closer to the GCC states. First came the sudden launch of a 52-day US military campaign against the Houthi militia in Yemen. Although the Gulf states were opponents of the Houthis, they had maintained a fragile de facto truce since 2022 in an effort to keep the situation in Yemen stable. Then, in June 2025, the region was shaken by Israel's twelve-day war with Iran – a conflict that had now reached the Gulf monarchies' doorstep. The decisive turning point came when President Trump authorised US air strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in support of Israel's military campaign.

In retaliation for the US bombardment, Iran fired ballistic missiles on 23 June 2025 at Qatar – home to Al Udeid, the largest US air base in the Middle East. For the small emirate, a long-feared nightmare scenario had come true: After years of watching regional conflicts from the sidelines, a member of the GCC had become a direct target. When Qatar was hit again on 9 September, this time during an Israeli air strike aimed at Hamas representatives based in Doha, the last illusion of safety was shattered.

After the attacks on Qatar, there was great dismay behind the scenes in the Arab world regarding the US.

Not only had Trump failed to prevent escalation, but Gulf rulers also now faced the uncomfortable question as to whether his policies had even – directly or indirectly – contributed to placing one of their own in the line of fire. The fact that only Qatar had been struck made little difference. The unique status of the wealthy Gulf states had long rested on their collective reputation as islands of stability in a volatile neighbourhood – destinations for tourists and investors, not for missiles. However profitable their privileged relationship with President Trump may have been, their AI deals and investment promises counted for little if the US could not safeguard the Gulf's role as a haven of stability – or even undermined this status.[11]

In the wake of the twin strikes on Qatar and a hastily convened Arab–Islamic summit, the Gulf states publicly tempered their reaction towards the US, wary of provoking Trump's anger.[12] Behind the scenes, however, the sense of shock was profound. The Gulf states had hoped for regional peace – but instead, the attacks on Qatar delivered a double blow. How had relations reached such a critical juncture despite the close ties between decision-makers in Washington and the Gulf capitals?

Diverging visions for the region

Beneath the enthusiasm with which the Gulf region greeted Trump's second presidency lay – from the outset – starkly differing strategic

priorities and threat perceptions between the Gulf states and the Trump administration – differences far greater than during his first term. This became clearest on two major fronts: Iran and Israel.

Donald Trump's regional approach appeared to pick up exactly where his first term had left off. Building on the centrepiece of his earlier Middle East policy, he declared the expansion of the Abraham Accords with Israel to be a top priority of his second presidency – most notably a normalisation agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. He also announced the revival of the "maximum pressure" strategy of sanctions and isolation against Iran that had defined his administration's stance towards the Islamic Republic from 2017 to 2021.[13] Both policies had once been welcomed and supported by key GCC members.

Saudi Arabia and Iran: Unexpected diplomatic rapprochement occurred after years of rivalry.

However, by the time Trump had returned to office, the priorities of the Gulf states – especially Saudi Arabia's – had shifted. Years of missile and drone attacks by the Tehran-backed Houthi militia – which in 2019 had temporarily crippled half of Saudi Arabia's oil output and in early 2022 had killed several people in Abu Dhabi – had forced a rethink. From the Gulf perspective, Washington's failure to respond decisively to these Iran-linked assaults had eroded confidence in US security guarantees and convinced regional leaders that de-escalation with Tehran was the only pragmatic option.

In spring 2023, Saudi Arabia restored its suspended diplomatic relations with its arch-rival Iran. While Riyadh's détente with Tehran often amounted to little more than symbolic gestures, communication between Iran and the Gulf states was closer at the start of Trump's second term than it had been at any point in the previous two decades.[14] Trump's revived doctrine of "maximum pressure" therefore no longer resonated in the Gulf.[15]

However, the divide between Washington and the Gulf extended well beyond the approach to Iran. From the Gulf states' perspective, Israel's increasingly aggressive war against Iran and its Palestinian, Yemeni, and Lebanese proxies had set off a dangerous escalatory trend that threatened to undo the progress of Saudi-led efforts to ease tensions with the Islamic Republic. When Trump took office in early 2025, the strategic outlook in the Gulf was shaped no longer by fears of Iranian expansion – as it had been during his first presidency – but by a perceived threat to regional stability arising from Israel's conduct of the war.

A rapid expansion of the Abraham Accords – as envisaged by the newly elected US President – ran entirely counter to this threat perception. While efforts to normalise relations with Israel were not abandoned altogether, their momentum had long since stalled.[16]

The prospect of Saudi Arabia establishing diplomatic relations with Israel without the simultaneous creation of a Palestinian state – as Bahrain and the UAE had done in 2020 – was becoming increasingly unlikely because public sentiment within the Kingdom had shifted markedly. Since the autumn of 2024, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had been publicly insisting on a credible and irreversible path towards Palestinian statehood as a precondition for any formal ties with Israel.[17] Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan even emerged as a driving force behind an international "alliance" dedicated to implementing the two-state solution.[18]

Wishful thinking in the Gulf

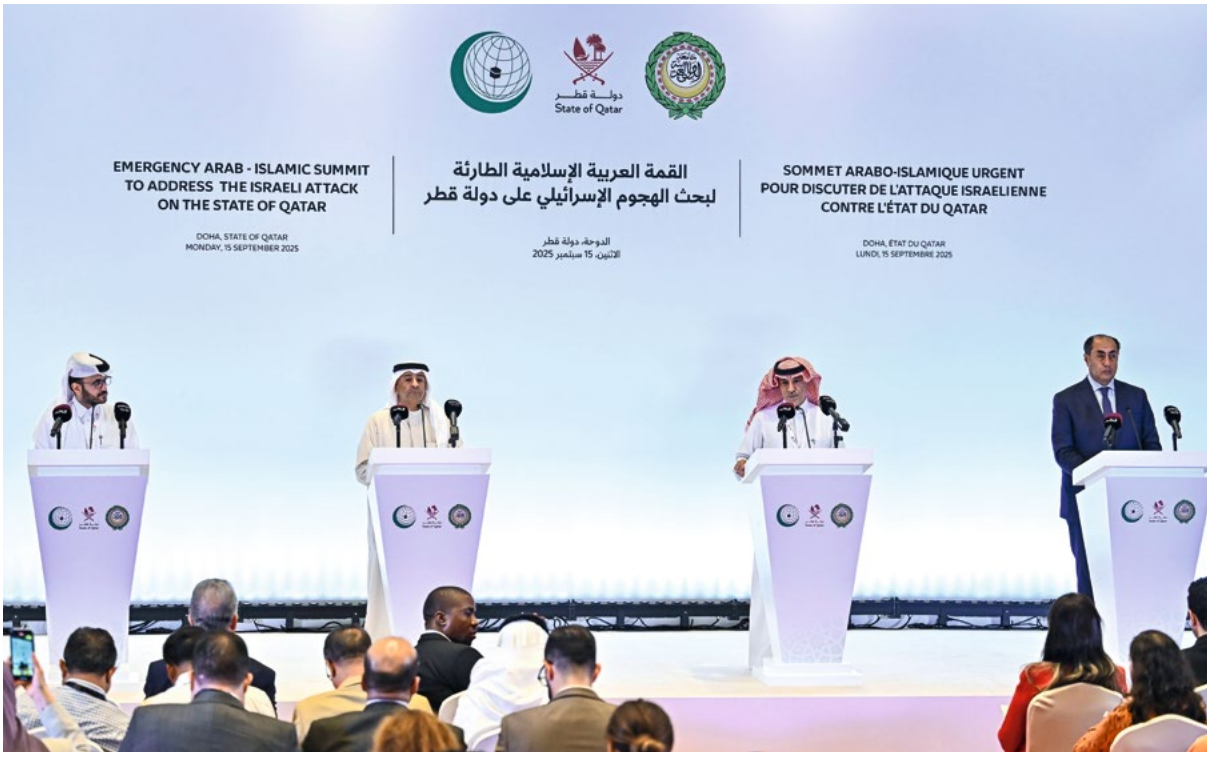
These diametrically opposed priorities took so long to surface mainly due to Trump's own contradictory nature and unpredictability. His Janus-faced policies allowed the Gulf states to maintain a selective interpretation of US interests in the region. While the US President proclaimed a hard line towards Iran, he simultaneously mused

about negotiating a new nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic. His push for a rapid expansion of the Abraham Accords was occasionally softened by assurances that Saudi Arabia could take its "own time".[19] Moreover, though Trump voiced unwavering support for Israel's ongoing counter-offensive against Hamas, this support was increasingly coupled with impatient calls for a ceasefire in Gaza.

Expectations of Trump as a peacemaker obscured the fact that his mantra has always been "peace through strength".

The Gulf states therefore chose to focus pragmatically on the version of the US President that best aligned with their own interests and that supported their policy of détente. They convinced themselves that Trump – with his apparent longing for a Nobel Peace Prize – had no appetite for new conflicts – not even with Iran – and was ultimately seeking a stable region.[20] When the US President abruptly called off his hastily launched military campaign against the Iran-backed Houthi militia and – during a Washington visit by Netanyahu – announced fresh nuclear talks with Tehran, Gulf leaders even thought they could detect a cooling in relations between Trump and the Israeli prime minister.

However, from the vantage point of the Arabian Peninsula, this view had blind spots. Expectations of Trump as a peacemaker obscured the fact that his guiding principle had always been "peace through strength". Thus, when US B-2 bombers suddenly dropped bunker-buster munitions on Iran, there was widespread astonishment in the Gulf that Trump – however reluctantly – had joined Netanyahu's war. With seemingly short memories, observers also overlooked the fact that



Demonstration of unity: Shortly after the Israeli attack on a Hamas delegation in Doha on 9 September 2025, a special Arab-Islamic summit was held. The participants strongly condemned the attack and declared their unconditional solidarity with Qatar. Photo: © Naushad, Imago.

this was the same President Trump who – during the Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia in 2019 – had once before stood by idly. His failure to prevent Israel's airstrikes on Qatar – another attack on a Gulf state, and this time, by a US ally – once again shattered long-held assumptions about regional security.

With Donald Trump, the Gulf states found a partner in Washington with whom they could quickly and easily forge strong personal ties – and who rewarded them with lucrative economic deals. However, when it comes to handling the regional powers of Israel and Iran, Washington, Riyadh, and Doha remain deeply divided, with far-reaching consequences for the Gulf's security and stability. Behind this situation lies the central question of the Gulf states' strategy in dealing with the US and Donald Trump: Can personal rapport and ceremonial displays of friendship ever provide a reliable basis for security policy?

Unpredictable US policy as an opening for Europe

The record after Trump's first year back in office remains mixed. After the euphoria of the spring and the disillusionment of the summer, a new phase may now be emerging. In the wake of the attacks on Qatar, the Gulf states closed ranks and turned adversity into advantage by jointly negotiating with Trump to secure a rare diplomatic breakthrough: In October, the US President persuaded the Israeli Prime Minister not only to issue a public apology to Qatar, but also to agree to a ceasefire and a hostage deal with Hamas. This episode demonstrated that the Gulf states' capacity to shape events endures despite recent setbacks. However, their hopes were quickly dashed when Trump's much-vaunted Gaza Plan – following private renegotiations with Netanyahu – watered down or omitted key Arab demands.[21] Reluctantly, the Gulf states backed the President's plan nonetheless.

Whether this marks a turning point towards renewed trust in US–Gulf relations remains to be seen. America's erratic policy leaves the GCC countries facing a strategic dilemma: They are uncertain as to whether their close relationship with Trump truly guarantees their security, yet they have staked everything on it. In security terms, the Gulf remains as dependent on the US as ever.

Alternatives are scarce. Occasional arms purchases from China or Turkey – and new regional defence pacts, such as the one recently signed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – cannot conceal the fact that no country on earth can offer the same depth and scope of military deterrence in defence of the Gulf as the US can.[22] Even the People's Republic of China – which maintains its only overseas military base across the Red Sea in Djibouti and has become the Gulf's most important trading partner thanks to its oil and gas imports – has shown time and again that it has no intention of assuming the role of security guarantor for the region.[23] After the attacks on Qatar, the mood across the Gulf is one of disillusionment, yet none of the states can afford to turn their backs on the US.

Personal rapport with President Trump does not automatically translate into influence over US foreign and security policy.

Instead, the GCC countries are now seeking to make their security partnership with Washington as watertight as possible. Just weeks after the air strikes on Doha, Qatari lobbying in Washington secured a presidential decree from Donald Trump declaring any attack on the emirate a threat to US national security and reserving the right for the US to respond militarily.[24] While this falls short of a formal Article 5 guarantee, it nonetheless strengthens US security commitments to Qatar. The emirate also succeeded in negotiating the stationing of Qatari fighter jets at a US air base – a remarkable achievement.[25] Also Saudi Arabia, repeatedly having sought to

secure a NATO-style security alliance with the US in the past, finally secured the coveted status of a "major non-NATO ally" of the US during Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Washington in November. While this does not comprise a clear security guarantee by the US, the simultaneously announced sale of American F-35 fighter jets to the Kingdom awards Saudi Arabia cutting-edge military technology that in the Middle East was exclusive to Israel until now. Therefore, lacking viable alternatives, the Gulf continues to rely on the US security umbrella.

However, the way the Gulf states manage their relationship with the US under President Trump now serves less as a model than it might have appeared to do in early 2025. For all their enthusiasm about the – in some respects considerable – influence they have wielded over Trump, the Gulf monarchs must also recognise that their leverage in Washington has its limits. At key turning points during Trump's first year in office, even Gulf leaders found themselves confined to the role of bystanders.

This in turn holds lessons for Europe. Close personal rapport with President Trump does not automatically translate into real influence over US foreign or security policy. Moreover, for the Gulf states – which share an extended neighbourhood with Europe and are becoming increasingly central to Germany's and Europe's engagement in the Middle East – the time may now be ripe for an alternative offer. A partnership with Europe that moves slowly but that keeps its word and offers institutional reliability may not replace the alliance with the US, but it could well appear more attractive to the Gulf today than many assume.

For this to happen, however, Europe's approach to the region must change substantially: Indeed, GCC members have little appetite for spending another 35 years negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU or for navigating Brussels' bureaucratic maze in search of a point of contact. Germany and Europe could benefit far more from the Gulf's rapid economic transformation if they deepened their commercial exchange and moved more swiftly to build investment and innovation partnerships. To do so, they would need to borrow the most effective element of Trump's Gulf policy: speed and personal engagement at the highest political level. The EU–GCC summit planned for 2026 in Saudi Arabia offers an ideal opportunity to begin this process.

– translated from German –

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