

Islamic Revolution. The GCC often bands together to present a united front against Iran. When it comes to improving or expanding these ties, two theoretical models are usually put forward: collective cooperation or bilateral relations. So far, collective cooperation between Iran and its southern neighbors hasn't taken off, despite numerous proposals. Instead, most ties have been handled one-on-one, which, while somewhat successful, hasn't led to any real breakthroughs. On paper, there may be plenty of protocols and agreements, but in practice, there's been little tangible progress. This is partly due to the foreign policy inclinations of these states and the structure of the GCC, where Saudi Arabia calls the shots as the "big brother" to the other five. Thus, neither through collective nor bilateral means have we managed to forge stable, flourishing relations that could set the stage for balanced regional political, social, and economic ties. Unfortunately, neither bilateral relations nor joint summits between the northern and southern shores of the Persian Gulf have yielded a dominant discourse or a model based on complementary economic advantages. This gap has given rise to mutual suspicion. Some of this stems from Iran's regional and global policies, and some from the southern states. To date, I haven't seen any study that weighs up each side's role in this lack of progress. Iran can certainly make a difference by fine-tuning its policies, and the southern Arab states can also play a key role. The most decisive factor, however, is the involvement of external powers. Unfortunately, their approach is rarely constructive; Instead, they tend to stir up trouble and drive wedges between countries. Take Trump's recent visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE: Beyond his inflammatory rhetoric, he sought to pit these countries against each other and talked up one side at the expense of the other. This is hardly a recipe for regional cooperation. Given our historical baggage, we still face unresolved issues, but we have no choice but to move past this and shift gears toward constructive engagement between the northern and southern Persian Gulf.

Bahrain is one regional country where Iran currently has no embassy. What do you see as the main challenge in restoring ties, especially given recent contacts? Are the two sides on a path to fully resume relations?

Bahrain's situation among the six southern neighbors is truly unique and complex. Part of this is due to historical, territorial, and geographic ties, and another part is rooted in cultural, religious, and past connections. Bahrain is the only country in the region ruled by a Sunni minority over a Shia majority. This is a legacy of the close ties that once bound Iran and Bahrain. Thus, managing this relationship requires a different approach. With most countries, the golden rule is good neighborliness, but with Bahrain, we need to go above and beyond. Finding the right formula for our foreign policy — especially our neighborhood strategy — is crucial. This will spill over into our regional and international



The map shows the geographical locations of the members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).
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standing, provided we take into account both sides' sensitivities and concerns. For example, co-operation should raise the bar for the political and social rights of Bahrain's Shia majority, allowing Bahrainis to sort out majority-minority issues internally, while Iran keeps out of their domestic affairs and maintains a balanced, dignified relationship with both the government and the people. The relationship should be such that it doesn't cast a shadow over Iran's ties with Bahrain or other countries. Given the recent meetings and contacts — some of which got underway during the previous Iranian administration and carried over into the current administration — it appears both sides are on track to rebuild ties and move past previous difficulties. The aim is to put in place a stable, practical relationship free from third-party interference. Domestic conditions in Iran and the regional environment, which has been somewhat imposed on Iran, also play a role. God willing, we'll see where this leads.

What benefits would Iran stand to gain by getting back on track with all its neighbors?

The first benefit of normalized

relations is a safer environment for Iran. Every country seeks not only internal security but also secure borders and, beyond that, the political and psychological security that flows from stable, dignified ties with neighbors. Good neighborliness and thriving relations can go a long way toward ensuring these layers of security, making the country less vulnerable to threats from, or through, its neighbors. This is the bare minimum. To move beyond that, we must recognize that each neighbor has unique economic, social, and cultural advantages. When people can move freely and cross borders without obstacles, such human exchanges pave the way for new models of cooperation — especially in trade and economics, but also in culture. These forms of cooperation will, in turn, spill over into the political sphere. As a result, such relations take a load off the country's foreign policy; When ties with neighbors are routine, calm, and constructive, the foreign policy team no longer needs to get bogged down in every minor issue, allowing it to focus on bigger challenges. The benefits of good neighborly relations should not be underestimated; they can have a profoundly positive impact across

the political, social, economic, cultural, and even human levels.

Donald Trump, the US president, made the rounds in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, with Iran and the nuclear deal high on the agenda. What message do you think the Iranian foreign minister's visits to these countries ahead of Trump's trip sent, and what were these countries expecting from Trump in talks about Iran?

I've already touched on Trump's trip in earlier answers. We live in a region that is underdeveloped, or at best, just starting out on the path to development. All of us here are classified as developing countries. The southern neighbors see a strong Iran as a potential hegemon, and thus are keen to keep Iran in check. Regional developments have mostly played out to Iran's detriment, creating what they see as an opportunity to redefine relations with the Arab world. In my view, much of the foreign minister's recent travel was a result of Iran's policy in this period. Unlike during the JCPOA era, when outreach to the southern Persian Gulf states was limited — partly because they unrealistically wanted a direct seat at

the negotiating table, which Iran opposed — we also dropped the ball tactically by not keeping them in the loop. Naturally, they sourced their information elsewhere and mounted opposition to the JCPOA, working to undermine it. However, in this new era, Iran has rolled out a more effective strategy to inform them. Recent consultations with China, Russia, Europe, and Arab states fit into this approach, and were less about Trump's trip per se. Trump's visit was not just political; his main goals were economic, aimed at drumming up investment. In reality, his trip was more about opening up markets for American goods and services. Meanwhile, the region's countries are flush with cash — both because of Iran's absence from the oil market and their own ambitions to break into global markets in energy, goods, new technology, AI, and digital industries. These are the opportunities Trump is zeroing in on: tapping into their financial resources and sealing deals for engineering services to give the US economy a shot in the arm.

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US President Donald Trump (C) takes a group photo with the leaders of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the group's secretary general at a summit held in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on May 14, 2025.
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