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Deep Dive
Shifting Sands of Persian Gulf

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Peacebuilding trends of Persian Gulf states

A man walks past the flags of the countries attending the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council summit at Bayan Palace in Kuwait City, Kuwait, on December 5, 2017.
● *AFP*

From left, US National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi National Security Advisor Musaad bin Mohammad al-Aiban, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, and Ukrainian Head of Presidential Office Andriy Yermak hold a meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on March 11, 2025.
● *AFP*

By Sharareh Abdolhoseinizadeh
Vice director of the Persian Gulf Studies Group at CMESS

O P I N I O N

The efforts of Persian Gulf states to mediate between Iran and the United States are not mere short-term maneuvers. Rather, they reflect a structural transformation in the regional order and the evolving diplomatic identity of these states. Over the past decade, their engagement in conflict resolution has extended beyond the Iran-US context, as each Persian Gulf country seeks a more active role in global peacemaking. The last round of Iran-US negotiations was not simply acts of regional diplomacy but a manifestation of the Persian Gulf states' rising influence in shaping a new world order. In essence, the mechanisms of diplomacy in the Persian Gulf have fundamentally shifted.

The emergence of Persian Gulf nations as active mediators in international crises signals a broader shift in the epicenter of global diplomacy. Whereas in the past, Europe and Western powers dominated peace talks and international negotiations, today, this role is increasingly occupied by states that combine oil wealth, geopolitical positioning, and pragmatic diplomacy.

Oman was the first Persian Gulf state to step into global diplomacy. It was followed by the UAE and Qatar, and more recently, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a central player. These nations are investing heavily in their international image and soft power to transcend their traditional role as energy suppliers. They seek to become influential actors in global decision-making, not just participants in the market. This transformation is reshaping the outlook of the Middle East and reflects a world that is no longer exclusively Western-centric.

The Persian Gulf monarchies have positioned themselves as credible mediators due to their neutral stance in many conflicts and their wide-ranging diplomatic relations. Hosting negotiations bolsters their international prestige and strengthens their diplomatic leverage, while also helping to reduce regional tensions and safeguard their national security.

Beneath the surface of peace-oriented diplomacy lies a strategic motive: self-preservation. In a region rife with volatility, any escalation can jeopardize investments, tourism, and major development projects. This strategic posture reflects deep concerns over regional instability, which could derail long-term economic visions such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 or the UAE's extensive development initiatives. These countries understand the intrinsic link between regional stability and their economic security, and thus aim to become key players in managing Middle Eastern tensions.

Iran-Persian Gulf relations have undergone a dramatic shift in the last decade. Unlike the 2015 nuclear negotiations, which unfolded amid tension and Persian Gulf opposition to Iran, today Persian Gulf countries not only support Iran-US dialogue but also help facilitate it. The delivery of a message from US President Donald Trump to Tehran via the UAE marked a turning point.

Persian Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, exert substantial influence on US policymakers through their economic and defense ties. In the Iran-US dialogue, they were employing diplomatic and media tools to persuade Washington that military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities would be futile and dangerously destabilizing. Such attacks would raise oil prices and risk environmental disaster from radiation leakage into Persian Gulf waters, threatening water and food security across the region.

The Persian Gulf states' mediation efforts have extended beyond the Middle East. In the absence or inefficiency of the UN and other international organizations, they are increasingly assuming the role of global intermediaries. This not only underscores the limitations of the UN system but also raises questions about the relevance of its leadership structure. Qatar, for instance, has hosted peace talks between Congo and rebel forces backed by Rwanda, and in 2022, mediated a peace agreement between Chad's military government and dozens of opposition groups.

Saudi Arabia even hosted indirect talks between the US and Russia amid the Ukraine war, reflecting the diminished role of Europe in conflict mediation and the pivot of global diplomacy toward the southern Persian Gulf.

For smaller Persian Gulf nations and even Saudi Arabia, this reflects a deliberate deployment of soft power. They aim to present themselves not just as regional stakeholders, but as global actors. The rise of Persian Gulf states as active international mediators is clear evidence of a shift in the axis of diplomacy. From regional influence to global ambition, their efforts mark a structural change in their international role.

This is what James Dorsey of Singapore's Middle East Institute calls "soft power with geopolitical ambition." Whether Qatar, Oman, or Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf nations no longer wish to be mere reactors to global developments. They aspire to be shapers of the international agenda — a direct outcome of their strategic recalibration in the global order.

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Development, democratic transition in Persian Gulf

A sustainable model or historical impasse?

By Mohammadreza Mohammadi
Researcher at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies

O P I N I O N

The ongoing debate about the relationship between development and democracy finds particularly noteworthy case studies in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf region. These countries present these two concepts in a distinct and sometimes contradictory manner. On one hand, their accelerated development model and oil-based economies have brought relative welfare and political stability to their citizens despite the absence of democratic institutions. On the other hand, critics of this model argue that real, sustainable development remains incomplete and fragile without the political participation of the people and governmental accountability.

The fundamental question is: does the path of development necessarily lead to a democratic transition? Or are there alternative paths to progress under specific circumstances? Some argue that in societies with tribal structures and rentier economies, democracy may lead to instability and threaten developmental achievements. Others believe that without political freedoms and transparent institutions, development will ultimately reach an impasse in the long run and fuel latent discontent. In this analysis, we attempt to objectively examine these contradictions and use Anthony Giddens' theory to study both compatibility and conflict approaches regarding the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Subsequently, by examining Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 document, we will look at the status of democratic transition in this country under Mohammed bin Salman's reforms.

From a structural perspective, democracy refers to institutionalized characteristics of societies or social systems that have formed and expanded over time and space. The agency approach to democratic transition emphasizes and focuses on the nature of the role played by human actors/agents and their behavior, as well as their interactions with each other, with the people, and with the government in explaining and understanding the transition to democracy and socio-political developments and events.

From Giddens' viewpoint, the structuralist approach emphasizes the role of constraining or encouraging rules and resources, social contexts and backgrounds, government, and social, cultural, and political structures in understanding types of individual and social behavior. These factors are considered important and decisive in determining human agents' behavior. From this perspective, the non-occurrence of democracy and democratic developments is analyzed with regard to red lines and socio-political and cultural limitations in the institutionalized structures. Accordingly, each society develops differently from others, and its political participation is based on its own criteria, norms, and historical conditions. Some of these societies move toward democratic standards more slowly, while others progress faster.

However, it appears that the countries of the southern Persian Gulf face numerous serious obstacles in this path.

To examine the relationship between economic development and democratization in rentier states, this analysis uses Giddens' theory. In the theoretical literature of political development, two main approaches have generally been proposed to explain the roots and reasons for transition to democracy and the occurrence of democratic developments: agent-centered or agency approaches and structure-centered approaches.

From one perspective, structure refers to institutionalized characteristics of societies or social systems that have formed and expanded over time and space. Structure consists of the rules and resources involved in the creation and articulation of social systems. In institutional analysis, structural or institutionalized characteristics are examined as constantly reproduced characteristics of social systems. The structuralist approach emphasizes the role of constraining or encouraging rules and resources, social conditions and backgrounds, government, and social, cultural, and political structures in understanding types of individual and social behavior, and considers these factors as important and decisive in determining human agents' behavior. From this perspective, the non-occurrence of democracy and democratic developments is analyzed with regard to red lines and socio-political and cultural limitations in the relevant institutionalized structures.

In the agent-based approach, emphasis is placed on the type and nature of the role played by human agents and their behaviors, as well as the nature of their interactions with each other, with the public, and with the government in explaining and understanding the transition to democracy and socio-political transformations. In general, this approach holds that although actors and social forces emerge from structural transformations, such changes do not automatically lead to democratic transformations without the continuous role-playing, persistence, and sacrifices of civil actors and social forces.

To understand the complexity of the relationship between economic transformations and democratization processes in the Persian Gulf countries, this article utilizes a combined theoretical framework incorporating both democratic transition theory and Giddens' structuration theory. Within the rentier states of this region, the political development literature presents two distinct analytical paths. On one hand, structural analysis guides us toward examining the entrenched institutional characteristics that have evolved over decades in these societies' socio-political fabric. These structures, including tribal-based political systems, mono-product economies reliant on oil, specific patterns of rent distribution, and authoritarian political cultures, simultaneously function as both restrictive rules and facilitators of political behaviors.

Within this framework, the obstacles to democratization must be sought in the rentier nature of governments, traditional tribal structures, specific legitimacy patterns, and regional security arrangements, all of which form an intricate network shaping the political landscape of these societies.

Conversely, the agent-based approach highlights the dynamic and transformative role of social forces. This perspective illustrates how reformist elites, emerging middle classes, youth movements, and civil groups, each in their own way, engage with seemingly rigid structures to enable gradual change. The experiences of countries in the region demonstrate that while these social actors originate from the very same traditional structures, their persistence and advocacy can slowly reshape political equations. In the particular context of the southern Persian Gulf states, these actors, fully aware of existing structural limitations, seek pathways to redefine the relationship between the state and society. In this regard, recent economic transformations in some of these countries — primarily framed within economic diversification programs and efforts to reduce oil dependency — have impacted both structures and actors, injecting new dynamism into this reciprocal relationship.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia unveiled its economic, political, and social reform agenda under the Vision 2030 framework. Certain technocrats, spearheaded by Mohammed bin Salman, presented this document as a means to extricate the country from its mono-product economy and its resulting constraints. Given the scale of the reforms and the inclusion of fundamental and disruptive initiatives, Vision 2030 represents a revolutionary agenda in its own right. Its aim is to drive structural economic change by reducing oil dependency, diversifying the economy, and empowering the private sector. Alongside this vision, the government committed to enhancing transparency, governmental accountability, and greater civic participation in economic and social domains. However, while the vision primarily focuses on economic development with limited attention to political dimensions, subsequent economic and social reforms have facilitated increased public liberties and extended new rights to women. At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces significant domestic political challenges, including intra-royal power struggles, the state's approach to dissent and reformist movements, and the growing opposition inside and outside the country.

The structural changes envisioned in Vision 2030 could potentially reconfigure the relationship between the government and its citizens, fostering greater openness in economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. In the long run, these changes might pave the way for a reconstruction of the political system and possibly a successful democratic transition. However, the question remains: Can Vision 2030 truly set Saudi Arabia on the path to democratization?

Enacted following the 2014 crisis, Vision 2030 aims at structural economic transformation in Saudi Arabia. While the vision promises transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and a degree of economic and social liberalization — elements that could potentially restructure state-citizen relations and bring long-term political change — the pace of implementation has been slow despite noticeable progress. Economic reforms in Saudi Arabia pursue various political objectives. Chief among these is the attempt to curb political crises, establish new legitimacy domestically and internationally based on economic development and openness, and rehabilitate the regime's global image — particularly after the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. In reality, however, these reforms are primarily designed to reinforce the absolute monarchy rather than democratic development. The program has concentrated power in the hands of King Salman and the Crown Prince, sidelining royal factions that previously controlled different centers of influence and replacing traditional elites loyal to King Abdullah with new ones aligned with the current leadership. As a result, Mohammed bin Salman's policies and economic reforms do not ultimately lead to democratization.

From the perspective of Giddens' structuration theory, Vision 2030 does not strictly adhere to agent-based or structure-based approaches in democratization. Structurally, democracy is understood as the institutionalized characteristics of societies or political systems that have evolved over time and space. Meanwhile, the agency-centered transition theory emphasizes the role of actors, their interactions, and engagement with the government and the public in shaping democratic transformations. However, Vision 2030 is fundamentally an economic agenda and does not incorporate structured democratic transition elements such as elections, systemic changes, or an expanded parliamentary role.

The experience of Arab Persian Gulf countries shows that while rapid economic development can occur without democracy — as seen in technocratic governance and massive investments in the UAE and Saudi Arabia — this model faces fundamental challenges. This development model, which hinges on oil revenues and centralized governance, has succeeded in establishing short-term infrastructure and relative welfare. Yet, its long-term sustainability remains in question due to oil dependency, structural inequalities, and vulnerability to crises. The core issue is that within such a framework, citizens remain dependent rather than autonomous actors in development, entirely reliant on the state for their well-being.

Ultimately, while economic indicators may improve, genuine and sustainable development requires accountable institutions, popular civic space for freedom, and sufficient political space for change — elements that Persian Gulf states will struggle with in the long run.

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Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia (R) walks with the Google co-founder Sergey Brin (front-L) at Google headquarters in Mountain View, California, the US, on April 5, 2018.
● *SAUDI ROYAL PALACE*

Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (front) takes part in the traditional cleaning of the Kaaba, held as a ceremony, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on August 16, 2022.
● *ROYAL COURT OF SAUDI ARABIA*

Notes on artificial intelligence in Persian Gulf

By Arshin Adib-Moghaddam
Professor at SOAS University of London

O P I N I O N

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a central force in shaping the future of industries, economies, and governance systems around the world. The Persian Gulf, a region known for its vast oil reserves and geopolitical importance, is increasingly embracing AI as part of its broader efforts to diversify economies and prepare for the post-oil future. While the region has traditionally relied on energy exports to fuel its growth, the rapid advancement of AI technologies, if screened for ethical blind spots, may present new opportunities. From government initiatives and smart city projects to the integration of AI in healthcare and finance, the Persian Gulf is undergoing a technological transformation that could reshape its future. A critical approach to these emergent AI industries couched in a human-centric and inclusive approach may open up a new foray of the region into the current debates about ethical application of AI systems.

The Persian Gulf's reliance on oil and gas exports has made it vulnerable to global energy market fluctuations. As such, AI has already been recognized as a key component in economic diversification efforts across the region. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have been actively investing in AI to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels and build knowledge-based economies.

The UAE established the position of Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence in 2017, highlighting the country's commitment to becoming a global leader in AI. Through initiatives like the "AI Strategy 2031," the UAE aims to integrate AI across various sectors, including government services, healthcare, and transportation. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" plan emphasizes the role of emerging technologies, including AI, in driving sustainable economic growth. Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in research and development to foster AI innovation, with projects ranging from autonomous vehicles to AI-powered healthcare systems.

Dubai's ambition to become the world's first fully smart city is a prime example of AI's role in reshaping urban living. The Dubai Smart City initiative, which was launched in 2013, utilizes AI to optimize transportation systems, reduce traffic congestion, and improve public safety. AI-powered surveillance systems, traffic management algorithms, and predictive analytics help make the city more livable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

In Iran, the country's growing AI sector is aided and abetted by a strong academic foundation and research culture. Universities such as Sharif University of Technology, the University of Tehran, and Amirkabir University of Technology (and others) actively contribute to AI research and education, as Iranian research institutions rank highly in the region in terms of the number and quality of AI-related scientific publications.

Despite the promising potential of AI, the Persian Gulf region faces several challenges in its integration. More attention has to be given to the nefarious effects of AI systems, for instance, on questions of gender, race, and class, to build systems that are truly effective in serving social change and socio-economic development.

Another major issue is the need for a skilled workforce capable of developing and managing AI systems. While the region has made substantial investments in AI infrastructure, there is a shortage of trained professionals in fields such as machine learning, data science, and robotics, and a dearth in sponsoring critical AI studies as an emergent theory to interrogate the dangers of AI for society and humanity in general. To address this, Persian Gulf countries need to invest in educational initiatives and partnerships with global universities to build a robust AI talent pool.

Another independent challenge is the ethical and regulatory framework surrounding AI technologies. The rapid pace of AI development has outpaced the establishment of comprehensive regulations to govern its use. Issues related to data privacy, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and job displacement need to be addressed to ensure that AI is deployed in a way that benefits society while minimizing potential harms. Persian Gulf countries must adopt ethical AI frameworks that prioritize fairness, transparency, and accountability to ensure public trust in AI systems. Whilst AI is playing an integral role in the region's development, challenges related to workforce readiness, ethical concerns, and regulation must be addressed to ensure the responsible deployment of AI technologies.

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A visitor communicates with a "conversational robot" during the third edition of the Global AI Summit (GAIN) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on September 12, 2024.
● *XINHUA*