

TURKEY'S SECURITY IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

СТРАТЕГІЯ БЕЗПЕКИ ТУРЕЧЧИНИ В РЕГІОНІ ПЕРСЬКОЇ ЗАТОКИ

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Abstract. *This article examines Turkey's security strategy in the Persian Gulf region, whose relevance stems from the growing geopolitical significance of this subregional space and Ankara's increasing ambition to establish itself as a key actor in regional security following the Arab Spring of 2011. The study identifies the distinct features of Turkey's approach, which combines economic pragmatism with instruments of both soft and hard power and reflects Ankara's adaptation to strategic shifts driven by the declining role of the United States and the rising threats posed by Iran, terrorism, and regional instability. Methodologically, the research is based on systemic and political science approaches and employs qualitative methods, including case studies, content analysis, discourse analysis, as well as comparative and politico-systemic analysis. The findings demonstrate that Turkey perceives the Persian Gulf as an integrated subregional system and develops a corresponding security strategy that often goes beyond bilateral formats, aiming to shape a new security architecture through resource complementarity, enhanced cooperation with GCC states, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. The study concludes that Turkey's policy in the Persian Gulf not only strengthens its regional influence but also contributes to the emergence of a more inclusive and multi-layered security system grounded in economic interdependence, diplomatic engagement, and collective responses to destabilizing factors.*

Keywords: *security strategy, foreign policy, Turkey, Persian Gulf, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Israel, Palestine, Yemen, Houthis.*

Анотація. *Стаття присвячена аналізу безпекової стратегії Туреччини в регіоні Перської затоки, актуальність якої зумовлена зростанням геополітичної ваги цього субрегіону та посиленням прагнення Анкари закріпитися як ключовий актор регіональної безпеки після подій Арабської весни 2011 року. Автори визначають специфіку турецького підходу, що базується на поєднанні економічної прагматики, інструментів «м'якої» та «твердої сили» й адаптації до стратегічних змін, пов'язаних зі скороченням ролі США та посиленням загроз з боку Ірану, тероризму та регіональної нестабільності. Методологічно дослідження ґрунтується на системному та політологічному підходах із застосуванням*

якісних методів — кейс-стаді, контент-аналізу, дискурс-аналізу, а також компаративного та політико-системного аналізу. Результати роботи демонструють, що Туреччина сприймає простір Перської затоки як цілісну субрегіональну систему та вибудовує відповідну безпекову стратегію, яка нерідко виходить за межі двосторонніх форматів і спрямована на формування нової архітектури безпеки через взаємодоповнюваність ресурсів, розвиток партнерства з державами РСАДПЗ та посилення власної стратегічної автономії. Доведено, що політика Туреччини в Перській затоці не лише сприяє зміцненню її впливу, а й стає важливим елементом формування більш інклюзивної та багатошарової системи регіональної безпеки, яка базується на економічній взаємозалежності, дипломатичній співпраці та спільному реагуванні на дестабілізуючі фактори.

Ключові слова: безпекова стратегія, зовнішня політика, Туреччина, Перська затока, Королівство Саудівська Аравія (КСА), Катар, Об'єднані Арабські Емірати (ОАЕ), Іран, Ізраїль, Палестина, Ємен, хусити.

Introduction. The Persian Gulf region occupies a special place in Turkey's foreign policy strategy, underscoring its exceptional importance as a distinct subregion of the Middle East. Unlike Ankara's broader Middle Eastern policy, a specific set of instruments is applied toward the Gulf states, shaped by their economic potential and geopolitical weight. This approach reflects Turkey's aspiration to adapt its security strategy to the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the countries of the Persian Gulf.

Turkey has been actively expanding its influence in the Persian Gulf area, positioning itself as a new actor in regional and subregional security following the Arab Spring of 2011. Security policy issues are of key importance to Turkey, as any crises in the Middle East have direct or indirect implications for its national interests—particularly in the context of neighboring states with significant Kurdish populations. In its effort to expand regional influence, Turkey plays a crucial role in shaping and sustaining the emerging security architecture of the Persian Gulf region, which constitutes an essential dimension of its overall security strategy.

Purpose of the Study. The purpose of this article is to identify the objectives and instruments for implementing Turkey's security strategy in the Persian Gulf region as an important dimension of its Middle Eastern policy, aimed at ensuring the effective planning and execution of its security agenda. Special attention is given to analyzing the transformation of Turkey's policy toward the countries of the region, which has had a significant impact on the overall security environment of the Persian Gulf.

Literature Review. The topic of Turkey's foreign policy and its relations with the Persian Gulf countries has been the subject of numerous academic studies covering the geopolitical, economic, and security aspects of regional interaction. Among the key works is the article by Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan, *"Turkey's Foreign Policy in Transition to the 'Century of Türkiye': Challenges, Vision, Goals, and Transformation"* (*Belirsizlikler çağında kararlı ve güçlü Türk dış politikası*, 2025), in which the author outlines the main principles of Turkey's foreign policy, emphasizing its priorities toward regional partners, including the Gulf states. This work highlights the transformation of Turkish diplomacy in the context of global challenges but does not delve deeply into the specific mechanisms for constructing a regional security architecture.

A significant contribution to the analysis of threats and challenges in the Middle East, as well as the complexities in Turkey's relations with regional actors, was made by İlhan Uzgel in the monograph *"Turkish Foreign Policy after the Presidential Order"* (Ilhan Uzgel, *Turkish Foreign Policy after the Presidential Order*), which examines the dynamics and evolution of Turkey's security strategy. However, as in many other studies, the role of Turkey in constructing the Persian Gulf security architecture remains insufficiently explored.

Other relevant works focus on the reboot of Turkish policy in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). In particular, the collective monograph edited by Valeria Talbot, *"Türkiye in the MENA Region: A Foreign Policy Reset"* (2022), analyzes the process of normalizing Turkey's relations with the Gulf states following periods of tension, including economic and diplomatic

aspects. Galit Dalay, in the articles “Turkey’s Middle East Reset: A Precursor for Re-escalation?” (*Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 2022) and “A Turning Point in Turkish-Saudi Ties” (*Institute for International Political Studies*, 2022), examines geopolitical shifts such as normalization with Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a prelude to potential escalations, but focuses primarily on economic motives, largely overlooking the security dimension.

Research on regional dynamics also covers specific events, such as the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey and economic embargoes. For example, Ragıp Soylu, in the article “‘Secret Embargo’: Saudi Arabia Stops Turkish Exports from Entering Kingdom” (*Middle East Eye*, 2019), examines the undeclared Saudi embargo on Turkey, which worsened bilateral relations. Similarly, Ali Küçükgöçmen, in “Turkish Court Halts Khashoggi Trial, Transfers It to Saudi Arabia” (*Reuters*, 2022), analyzes the legal repercussions of Khashoggi’s murder for Turkish-Saudi relations. These studies focus on the period of confrontation but do not address the subsequent transformation toward a shared security architecture.

The broader context of the Middle East’s “Great Reset” is discussed in the article by Galip Dalay and Tarik Yousef, “Making Sense of the Middle East’s ‘Great Reset’” (*The National Interest*, 2022), which examines regional normalization, including Turkey’s role in the dynamics of the Middle Eastern regional landscape after the Arab Spring. Neil Quilliam, in “Is the New Arab Alliance Too Good to Be True?” (*Chatham House*, 2021), analyzes the formation of new alliances in the Gulf but does not focus on Turkey’s contribution to regional security.

More recent aspects, such as Turkey’s response to events following October 7, 2023, and the potential collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, are examined in the analytical article “Turkey’s Repositioning in the Middle East’s Emerging Order” (*Arab Center Washington DC*, 2025), which highlights Turkey’s reorientation toward cooperation with Gulf countries to stabilize the region. Additionally, President Erdoğan’s statement describing Netanyahu as “the greatest threat to Middle East security” (*Indeksonline.net*, 2025) and the Turkish National Security Council’s resolution on counterterrorism and calls for action regarding Gaza (*TRT World*, 2025) illustrate Ankara’s current stance, emphasizing a focus on regional stability.

Overall, the existing literature addresses the evolution of Turkey’s foreign policy and its relations with the Persian Gulf states, covering economic, ideological, and geopolitical aspects (for example, Erdoğan’s visit to the UAE, *Al Jazeera*, 2022; joint statement following the meeting with the Saudi Crown Prince, *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye*, 2022). However, a notable gap remains in adequately addressing Turkey’s security strategy in the Persian Gulf, its role in shaping the region’s security architecture, and the policy transformation processes in Ankara that influence the overall security environment of the Gulf. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing key events and Turkey’s strategies in the context of regional developments.

Methods.

To analyze the theoretical, conceptual, and practical-political foundations of Turkey’s security strategy in the Persian Gulf region, a political science approach is applied. The use of a systemic approach made it possible to demonstrate that qualitative changes within the subregional space of the Persian Gulf ensured both its perception as a coherent entity by extraregional powers, including Turkey, and the need to develop a security strategy for this consolidated space—often replacing policies toward individual Gulf states.

For the study of Turkey’s policy toward Gulf countries, particularly the KSA, UAE, and Qatar, a comparative method was employed, while a political-system method was used to identify the specific features of implementing Turkey’s security strategy toward the Gulf states. The authors adopt a qualitative approach, incorporating case studies, content analysis, comparative methods, and discourse analysis.

Main Findings of the Study.

The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2011 and spread across most countries in the Middle East and North Africa, fundamentally altered the region’s geopolitical landscape. The Gulf monarchies, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman, as well as Egypt which experienced a military coup in 2013 responded negatively to these transformative processes. In contrast, Turkey viewed the Arab Spring as an opportunity to strengthen its influence, shifting from a “soft power” policy to a more active Middle Eastern

strategy, both in North African countries such as Libya and Egypt, and in Syria and the Persian Gulf region.

Turkey has been actively expanding its influence in the Persian Gulf region, positioning itself as a new player in regional security following the Arab Spring. Its security strategy aims to ensure strategic autonomy, fill the vacuum created by the declining role of the United States, and counter threats from Iran, terrorism, and regional instability (*Birol, B. 2023*). Ankara implements a “forward defense” policy, which involves proactive actions abroad to neutralize hybrid threats (*International Affairs. 2025*). A key element of this strategy is military presence.

Between 2014 and 2015, Turkey established its first base in Qatar, later expanded into the full-scale Khalid Bin Al Walid military camp in 2019, hosting thousands of troops for joint exercises and threat mitigation (*Middle East Eye. 2023*). During the 2017 Gulf Cooperation Council crisis, Turkey increased its contingent in Qatar to prevent escalation and protect its ally from the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (*Birol, B. 2023*). Ankara also proposed establishing bases in Saudi Arabia (2015) and Kuwait (2023), and explored possibilities in Oman, although not all initiatives were implemented (*Middle East Eye. 2023*). This military presence is intended to secure maritime routes and contribute to regional stability.

Partnerships with the GCC countries represent another important aspect. Turkey has concluded defense agreements with Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, and following the normalization of relations in 2021 (Al-Ula Agreement), with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (*International Affairs. 2025*). Turkish arms exports including Bayraktar TB2 drones, tanks, and “Steel Dome” air defense systems have risen from \$248 million in 2002 to over \$4 billion in 2022, positioning Turkey as an alternative to traditional suppliers such as the United States or Russia (*Birol, B. 2023*). These partnerships allow GCC countries to diversify their dependence on the West amid the U.S. “pivot” to Asia and ongoing regional conflicts, such as the Israel-Hamas war (*V. Talbot, 2023*).

The main challenges for Turkey include tensions with Iran, which perceives its presence as provocative, and domestic economic constraints (*Middle East Eye. 2023*). Nevertheless, with the evolution of its policy from “soft power” to “hard power” after 2011, Turkey seeks to position itself as a security guarantor for the GCC, complementing the United States, particularly in the context of potential shifts in Washington’s regional policy (*Birol, B. 2023*).

One of the key episodes that intensified regional tensions was the 2017 Gulf crisis, known as the Qatar blockade. The Saudi-Emirati bloc, supported by several other countries, accused Qatar of supporting Islamist movements and demanded that Turkey join the blockade and sever its alliance with Qatar, including closing its military base in Doha. Turkey’s refusal to comply with these demands was driven by the strategic importance of the base for maintaining its regional influence.

Turkey’s relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorated further following the 2018 murder of opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Turkish authorities accused Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of orchestrating the crime, which led to an effective, undeclared economic embargo by Saudi Arabia. Trade between the two countries sharply declined, and bilateral relations came close to breaking down.

Turkey’s relations with the UAE also experienced a deep rift, driven by ideological, geopolitical, and personal disputes. Divergent approaches to political Islam and reactions to the Arab Spring highlighted an ideological conflict, while confrontations in regional crises particularly in Qatar, Libya, Sudan, and Syria intensified geopolitical rivalry. An information war and accusations against the UAE of involvement in the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey added a personal dimension to this confrontation. While Turkey’s criticism of Saudi Arabia prior to Khashoggi’s murder remained relatively restrained, its stance toward the UAE was more open and outspoken.

Amid these developments, Turkey and the Saudi-Emirati bloc faced new challenges in the Middle East, including the strengthening of the Houthis and the blockade of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, adding further complexity to the formation of the Persian Gulf security architecture.

Since 2021, Turkey’s foreign policy has undergone significant changes driven by both domestic and regional factors. Key events influencing this shift include the signing of the Abraham Accords (2020), which paved the way for the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states, as well as the Al-Ula Declaration (2021), which ended the blockade of Qatar (*Dalay, G.; Yousef, T., 2022*). Additionally, the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia

created a new context for regional interaction (*Quilliam, N., 2021*). For Turkey, these developments coincided with a domestic economic crisis marked by high inflation, current account deficits, lira depreciation, and depleted foreign exchange reserves. These constraints made it impossible to continue the aggressive policies that had previously led to Ankara's isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean, including its exclusion from regional initiatives such as the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (*Arab Center Washington DC, 2025*).

Recognizing these challenges, Turkey returned to the "zero problems with neighbors" policy that had been successful in the early 2000s. This approach involved normalizing relations with countries with which it previously had tense relations, including Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and even Syria (*V. Talbot, 2023*). Economic necessity became the main driver of this strategic pivot. A prominent example of this policy was President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE in 2023 following his reelection. These trips culminated in the signing of economic agreements, including investment deals with the UAE worth over \$50 billion, representing an important step in strengthening bilateral economic ties (*Al Jazeera, 2022*).

Foreign policy factors have also played a key role in the transformation of Turkey's strategy. The reduction of American presence in the region following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan enabled Iran to increase support for non-state actors, such as the Yemeni Houthis and Lebanese Hezbollah. The Houthis intensified attacks on commercial vessels in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, while Hezbollah became more active in southern Lebanon, creating additional security challenges (*Arab Center Washington DC, 2025*).

However, Turkey does not consider Iran the main destabilizing factor in the region. Ankara attributes this role to Israel, particularly after the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza, which involved the destruction of civilian infrastructure and accusations against Israel of war crimes (*Arab Center Washington DC, 2025*). Turkey's position on Israel as the primary regional destabilizer was clearly articulated by President Erdoğan, who described Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "the greatest threat to Middle East security" (*Indeksonline.net, 2025*). This stance partially aligns with the perspectives of Gulf countries, which seek economic stability and regional leadership.

Another important aspect is the shared position of Turkey and the Gulf countries regarding Syria following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024. Both sides advocate for a stable Syria that limits Iranian influence and supports Sunni governance in Damascus. Turkey, leveraging its military experience in the Syrian conflict, provides technical expertise, while Saudi Arabia offers financial support for reconstruction and state-building. This complementary cooperation was confirmed by the first official visit of Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, to Saudi Arabia, coordinated with Turkey. Saudi Arabia also played a key diplomatic role by arranging a meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and al-Sharaa, which led to the lifting of sanctions on Syria (*Arab Center Washington DC, 2025*).

Turkey, in turn, has assumed a supportive role, reflecting its limited capacity to influence global processes compared to the financial resources of the Gulf states.

Turkey actively supports the creation of a new security architecture through regional platforms, notably the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). President Erdoğan has emphasized the need to prevent a new "Sykes-Picot agreement" and called for unity among Muslim countries in countering Israel's destabilizing actions (*Indeksonline.net, 2025*). Syria's reintegration into the OIC marked an important step in this direction, highlighting Turkey's commitment to consolidating regional efforts to ensure stability.

Thus, Turkey plays an important, albeit not leading, role in shaping the new security architecture of the Persian Gulf. Its strategy is grounded in economic pragmatism, cooperation with Gulf states, and countering destabilizing actors, particularly Israel and Iran, allowing Ankara to strengthen its regional influence while adapting to new geopolitical challenges.

Conclusions.

The contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, marked by new security challenges and a desire to de-escalate protracted conflicts, create the conditions for the formation of a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf region. This emerging model, resulting from synergy between regional states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, and

extraregional actors, notably Turkey, emphasizes economic interdependence, diplomatic cooperation, and joint efforts to counter destabilizing factors. It not only aligns with the strategic interests of the participating countries but also holds the potential to reshape the broader regional order, promoting stability, integration, and sustainable development across the Middle East and North Africa.

Turkey, positioning itself as a strategic partner in this process, demonstrates an innovative approach that combines pragmatic adaptation to economic constraints with the utilization of its unique geopolitical potential. Its involvement in stabilizing post-Assad Syria, active participation in regional platforms such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and efforts to attract investments from Gulf countries reflect *a shift from ambitions of regional hegemony to a role as coordinator and mediator*. This transition underscores Ankara's deeper understanding of the necessity for cooperation within a multipolar regional order, where economic stability and security cooperation emerge as key priorities.

The new approach of this study lies in conceptualizing Turkey's role as a supportive yet indispensable element of the new security architecture, based on the principle of complementarity of resources and shared strategic objectives. Unlike previous models, which often relied on confrontation or unilateral dominance, this architecture proposes an inclusive approach that integrates economic, political, and security dimensions. However, its resilience will depend on the participants' ability to counter external destabilizing factors, particularly aggressive actions by Israel, and on the institutionalization of cooperation through regional mechanisms. Future research should focus on analyzing the long-term viability of this model, assessing its stability amid domestic political transformations in the participating countries, as well as its capacity to adapt to new geopolitical challenges, such as the escalation of the Iran-Israel confrontation or shifts in the global role of the United States.

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