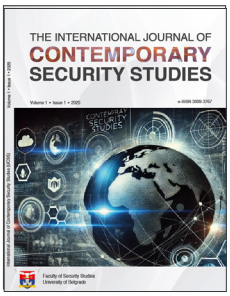
Volume 2 • Issue 2 • 2026

Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade

International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies (IJCSS)




*Article*

# The Fragmentation of Gulf Security Doctrine amid Prolonged U.S.–Iran Strategic Rivalry

**Mostafa Hetteh**[1,*]

[1] York University, Department of Politics, 4700 Keele St, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada; Mostafa.hetteh@gmail.com

* Correspondence: Mostafa.hetteh@gmail.com.

Received: 5 June 2026; Revised: 19 August 2026; Accepted: 27 September 2026; Published: 5 November 2026.

## ABSTRACT

Conventional alliance and hierarchical security approaches suggest that shared external threats and reliance on a common security provider should encourage strategic coordination among aligned states. Yet the Gulf experience under prolonged U.S.–Iran strategic rivalry reveals a different pattern: states embedded within a broadly shared U.S.-anchored security architecture have maintained institutional alignment while developing distinct security doctrines. This article asks why Gulf states exposed to comparable regional pressures and sustained U.S. security relationships develop divergent approaches to threat, vulnerability, deterrence, external security dependence, and strategic autonomy. It argues that external pressures do not translate directly into convergent security policies; instead, they are filtered through nationally specific political, institutional, material, and historical contexts. These interpretive differences shape assessments of vulnerability and external security reliability, which in turn guide differentiated strategic adaptation. Through repetition, organizational learning, and institutional reinforcement, these adaptations can become relatively durable security doctrines. The study employs a theory-driven most-similar systems design comparing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman, combining structured, focused comparison, qualitative documentary analysis, and process tracing of developments from 1979 to 2025. The analysis identifies four dominant doctrinal orientations: managed dependence in Saudi Arabia, strategic redundancy in the UAE, networked mediation in Qatar, and institutionalized balancing diplomacy in Oman. The article conceptualizes persistent doctrinal divergence alongside continued institutional alignment as security fragmentation. This concept captures an outcome pattern rather than a causal mechanism and complements existing approaches to alliance heterogeneity, strategic culture, hedging, diversification, and strategic autonomy. The article also examines the ongoing 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict as a time-bounded, provisional stress test of these historically reconstructed doctrines rather than as evidence of completed doctrinal change. The findings suggest that hierarchical security architectures can sustain institutional alignment without producing strategic convergence, because states may interpret and institutionalize common external pressures differently.

ONLINE FIRST

## KEYWORDS

Security fragmentation; Gulf security; alliance theory; U.S.–Iran rivalry; hierarchical security orders; security doctrine divergence.

Academic Editor:
Prof. Dr. Vladimir M. Cvetković
Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Hetteh, M. (2026). The Fragmentation of Gulf Security Doctrine amid Prolonged U.S.–Iran Strategic Rivalry. *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies*, 2(2), 145-174.

## 1. Introduction

Alliance politics scholarship suggests that common external threats can encourage coordination among alliance members through shared deterrence objectives, policy alignment, and institutional cooperation. However, alliances rarely produce complete strategic convergence. Research on alliance dilemmas, asymmetric relationships, hedging, and small-state agency demonstrates that states often pursue differentiated strategies within shared security frameworks (Snyder, 1997; Lake, 2011; Goh, 2007; Cha, 2016). Lake (2011) shows how patron–client relationships structure security behavior through unequal authority relations, while Goh (2007) demonstrates how smaller states bargain with dominant powers to preserve autonomy and strategic flexibility. Similarly, research on alliance heterogeneity highlights variation in threat perceptions, strategic priorities, and responses to external pressures (Snyder, 1997; Cha, 2016). Together, these perspectives establish that institutional alignment can coexist with differentiated security strategies.

Studies of hedging and small-state agency further show that states may diversify relationships, maintain multiple security partnerships, and pursue diplomatic flexibility to reduce vulnerability and preserve strategic options (Cha, 2016). Such variation does not necessarily indicate alliance failure. The less developed question is how repeated differences in threat interpretation, alliance expectations, and strategic adaptation become institutionalized into distinct security doctrines while formal security relationships remain intact.

The prolonged strategic confrontation between the United States and Iran has constituted a central organizing axis of Gulf security politics since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Through successive episodes of military confrontation, proxy competition, sanctions, maritime crises, and nuclear disputes, this rivalry has shaped the strategic environment within which Gulf states have developed their security policies.

In this study, a shared U.S.-anchored security architecture does not refer to a NATO-style collective defense alliance with unified command structures or automatic mutual defense obligations. Rather, it refers to a regional security order based on overlapping bilateral and institutional arrangements, including defense agreements, military access, intelligence cooperation, training, exercises, arms transfers, and GCC-related coordination mechanisms. Within this architecture, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman maintained substantial institutional alignment with the United States, though they differed in levels of dependence, threat perception, and strategic priorities. Institutional alignment is therefore assessed through observable indicators such as defense cooperation, military access, intelligence relationships, arms partnerships, and operational coordination.

The central puzzle is why states operating within this broadly shared security architecture and facing comparable regional strategic pressures associated with the prolonged U.S.–Iran rivalry developed increasingly differentiated conceptions of deterrence, vulnerability, strategic dependence, and strategic autonomy. The puzzle is not that Gulf states responded differently to external pressures—existing alliance scholarship recognizes this variation—but that institutional alignment persisted even as these differences became durable enough to constitute distinct security doctrines. The article therefore examines how security partnerships can coexist with divergent national interpretations of threat, vulnerability, alliance reliability, and strategic autonomy.

The article argues that the prolonged U.S.–Iran confrontation contributed to, rather than mechanically determined, a gradual process of doctrinal differentiation across Gulf states. Broadly shared regional strategic pressures were filtered through nationally specific interpretive frameworks, producing different assessments of vulnerability and alliance reliability. These assessments shaped policy adaptation that, through repetition and institutionalization, developed into distinct security doctrines. This process's cumulative outcome is what this article defines as security fragmentation.

The article advances five theoretical propositions corresponding to this causal process:

Proposition 1: Comparable regional strategic pressures do not necessarily produce convergent national security doctrines. States exposed to similar external challenges may interpret and respond differently because they filter strategic environments through distinct historical, institutional, and political contexts.

Proposition 2: Elite interpretive frameworks mediate the relationship between external security pressures and doctrinal adaptation. External threats influence security policy not directly, but through nationally specific understandings of vulnerability, legitimacy, and strategic priorities.

Proposition 3: Variation in assessments of alliance reliability and vulnerability generates differentiated policy responses. States that perceive different levels of dependence, exposure, and uncertainty regarding external protection are likely to adopt different approaches to deterrence, autonomy, and strategic adaptation.

Proposition 4: Repeated patterns of adaptation become institutionalized over time into distinct security doctrines. Strategic responses that are repeatedly reproduced through policy practice, defense planning, and institutional behavior may develop into durable doctrinal orientations.

Proposition 5: The cumulative outcome of these differentiated interpretive and adaptive processes is security fragmentation across states within a shared security architecture. Security fragmentation therefore represents an observed pattern of doctrinal divergence despite continued institutional alignment.

Existing scholarship provides important explanations for alliance formation, alliance maintenance, balancing behavior, alliance dilemmas, and alliance breakdown. Research on asymmetric alliances, patron–client relationships, hedging, small-state agency, and intra-alliance bargaining demonstrates that states negotiate, reinterpret, and selectively adapt security relationships rather than simply following unified alliance preferences. However, scholars have paid less attention to how security architectures remain institutionally stable while producing internally differentiated security doctrines.

This question is particularly relevant in the Gulf because the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represents an important but limited form of regional security coordination. Unlike NATO, the GCC does not operate as an integrated collective defense alliance with automatic mutual defense commitments or unified military command structures. Nevertheless, it has contributed to regional security coordination through joint consultations, defense cooperation initiatives, intelligence exchange, and collective security efforts, including the Peninsula Shield Force.

GCC security cooperation has nevertheless faced significant constraints. Differences in threat perception, foreign policy orientation, leadership preferences, and regional competition have limited the emergence of a unified Gulf security doctrine. The 2017 Gulf crisis demonstrated that GCC membership could coexist with substantial disagreement over regional order, diplomatic alignment, and security priorities. Consequently, bilateral relationships with external partners—particularly U.S. defense relationships, military access agreements, and security partnerships—have often become more influential than GCC mechanisms in shaping national security strategies.

The Gulf experience therefore suggests a possibility insufficiently theorized in existing literature: formal security structures and external patronage relationships may persist while states increasingly diverge in how they interpret threats, deterrence, vulnerability, and strategic dependence. To capture this condition, this article develops the concept of security fragmentation, defined as the systematic and persistent doctrinal divergence among states that remain institutionally aligned within a shared security architecture. It is conceptualized as an outcome pattern rather than an independent causal mechanism.

The causal process can be summarized as:

Broad regional strategic pressures lead to elite interpretations and domestic institutional filtering. This results in varied assessments of vulnerability and alliance reliability, driving different policy responses. Over time, these differences become institutionalized as separate security doctrines, culminating in security fragmentation.

Security fragmentation differs from hedging, diversification, and alliance heterogeneity. Those concepts primarily describe variations in external alignment behavior, partnership choices, or alliance relationships, whereas security fragmentation concerns the development of distinct internal strategic logics and durable doctrinal orientations within a common security environment (Cvet-

kovic, 2026). It therefore does not imply alliance collapse, institutional breakdown, or withdrawal of external security guarantees. Rather, it describes a condition in which institutional alignment remains durable while doctrinal convergence declines.

The historical analysis covers 1979 to 2025. The 2026 U.S.–Iran conflict is treated separately as a time-bounded analytical stress test rather than as evidence of completed historical outcomes. It examines how historically developed doctrines would operate under intensified regional insecurity, treating observations about the 2026 conflict as provisional.

The article proceeds in seven substantive sections. Section 2 reviews alliance, hierarchy, strategic culture, hedging, strategic autonomy, and related approaches to intra-alliance variation and identifies the theoretical gap addressed by security fragmentation. Section 3 presents the comparative research design, case-selection strategy, data sources, operationalization, and process-tracing methodology. Section 4 reconstructs the historical development of security doctrines in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman from 1979 to 2025. Section 5 explains the causal process by which comparable external pressures translate into divergent security doctrines within a shared security architecture. Section 6 applies these historically reconstructed doctrines to the 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict as a strategic stress test. Section 7 develops the broader theoretical implications of security fragmentation and specifies the conditions under which the argument would be rejected. The conclusion summarizes the article's theoretical and empirical contributions.

## 2. Gulf Security and Alliance Theory

### *2.1. Alliance Theory, Hierarchy, and Intra-Alliance Variation*

Alliance theory provides the starting point for explaining why states facing common security threats form and sustain security relationships. Walt (1987) argues that states respond to perceived threats through balancing and alignment, while Snyder (1997) emphasizes alliance commitments, credibility, and expectations regarding partner reliability. Together, these approaches establish an important baseline: common threats and external security guarantees create incentives for alignment, but the value of a security relationship depends partly on how states assess the credibility and reliability of the protection it provides.

Faculty of Security Studies
University of Belgrade

States connected to the same security provider may nevertheless assess vulnerability, external assistance, and security-guarantee credibility differently. Alliance theory therefore allows for variation within continuing alignment, but its principal focus remains the formation, maintenance, and durability of security relationships. For the present study, the more specific question is how such variation becomes sufficiently durable to shape distinct national security doctrines.

Hierarchy theory extends this perspective by treating security relationships as asymmetric arrangements in which dominant powers provide security benefits while exercising varying degrees of authority over subordinate states (Lake, 2011). This perspective is particularly useful for the Gulf because U.S.–Gulf relationships combine external protection with substantial national agency. Gulf governments may remain dependent on U.S. capabilities while seeking to manage, supplement, or partially compensate for that dependence. Hierarchy theory therefore clarifies the asymmetric institutional setting within which Gulf states exercise strategic agency, but it leaves less specified how states occupying comparable positions may interpret dependence differently and convert it into distinct strategic practices.

Regional security approaches add another layer by emphasizing historical experience, regional rivalries, and patterns of interaction among neighboring states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Gulf states differ in their relationships with Iran, geographic exposure, regional rivalries, and historical experiences, all of which condition how they experience common pressures and shape assessments of threat and vulnerability. Yet differentiated regional pressures do not by themselves explain why states exposed to broadly comparable conditions may institutionalize different strategic responses while remaining embedded within overlapping security arrangements.

Taken together, these approaches establish the structural and institutional context of Gulf security while leaving open a more specific question: how do states operating within overlapping security arrangements interpret comparable pressures and translate those interpretations into divergent and relatively durable strategic orientations?

### *2.2. Explaining Variation within Shared Security Relationships*

Strategic culture explains variation by emphasizing how historical experience, institutional memory, political identity, and elite interpretation shape enduring approaches to force, diplomacy, deterrence, and alliance management (Johnston, 1995). It shows why similar external pressures may take on different strategic meanings across political and institutional contexts. Material, geographic, institutional, and leadership-related factors may also shape threat perception, deterrence preferences, external security dependence, and strategic autonomy. These factors are therefore treated as alternative explanations rather than merely background conditions. The analysis evaluates whether they adequately account for observed differences or whether nationally specific interpretive processes and subsequent institutionalization provide additional explanatory leverage.

The analytical distinction is between conditions that shape the strategic environment and the interpretive processes through which those conditions acquire strategic meaning. Interpretation does not override material constraints; rather, the study examines how material and institutional conditions are translated into different policy responses and how repeated responses may become institutionalized as enduring strategic orientations (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Distinguishing Security Fragmentation from Existing Concepts of Intra-Alliance Variation

| Approach | What it explains | Why it matters here | What remains unexplained |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Alliance theory/balancing** | How states respond to external threats through alignment, balancing, and security cooperation. | Establishes incentives for coordination under shared threats. | Does not fully explain why aligned states can develop different security doctrines. |
| **Hierarchy and asymmetric security** | How dominant powers provide protection while smaller states retain strategic agency. | Explains continued Gulf dependence on U.S. security provision alongside different strategies. | Does not explain how persistent differences become institutionalized as distinct doctrines. |
| **Strategic culture** | How history, identity, institutional memory, and interpretation shape strategic preferences. | Explains why similar conditions may acquire different meanings. | Provides less specification of how differences become durable doctrinal divergence within a shared architecture. |
| **Intra-alliance variation/ alliance heterogeneity** | Why allies differ in threat perceptions, capabilities, interests, and commitment preferences. | Establishes that alignment need not produce strategic uniformity. | Identifies variation without fully explaining its institutionalization into durable doctrines. |
| **Strategic adaptation** | How states adjust policies, capabilities, and partnerships in response to changing threats. | Helps explain Gulf responses to repeated regional shocks. | More readily explains adaptation within states than divergent and persistent trajectories across comparable cases. |
| **Hedging and external diversification** | How states manage uncertainty through multiple partnerships and selective alignment. | Explains continued U.S. relationships alongside alternative partnerships. | Does not establish the underlying strategic logic or doctrinal meaning of diversification. |
| **Strategic autonomy** | How states expand freedom of action through capabilities, partnerships, and decision-making capacity. | Explains efforts to reduce dependence without abandoning existing relationships. | Does not fully explain why autonomy is pursued through different pathways or becomes doctrinally embedded. |

| Approach | What it explains | Why it matters here | What remains unexplained |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Security fragmentation** | How aligned states develop persistent differences in threat interpretation, deterrence, security reliability, and strategic autonomy. | Directly addresses continued alignment alongside durable doctrinal divergence. | Complements rather than replaces material and institutional explanations. |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

Strategic culture therefore provides the interpretive foundation, while alliance heterogeneity establishes that institutional alignment does not require strategic uniformity. The latter, however, treats variation largely as a feature of alliance relationships rather than explaining when repeated differences become organized and institutionalized as national security doctrine.

Strategic adaptation provides a further explanation by examining how states modify policies, capabilities, and relationships in response to changing security environments. This is particularly relevant to the Gulf, where the Iranian Revolution, Iran–Iraq War, Gulf War, post-2011 conflicts, Yemen war, 2017 Gulf crisis, 2019 Abqaiq–Khurais attacks, and subsequent regional de-escalation created repeated opportunities for adjustment. Its limitation is that adaptation better explains change within individual states than why comparable pressures produce divergent and enduring trajectories across cases.

Research on hedging, strategic autonomy, and alliance diversification further demonstrates that dependence and autonomy are not mutually exclusive. Hedging allows states to maintain major security relationships while developing ties with alternative actors to preserve flexibility and reduce vulnerability (Goh, 2007). Strategic autonomy concerns expanding independent decision-making capacity without necessarily abandoning existing security relationships (Cha, 2016), while diversification emphasizes expanding defense relationships beyond a traditional provider. These approaches explain why continued U.S. security involvement does not preclude alternative strategies, but they primarily describe relationship management rather than the strategic logics that give similar behaviors different meanings. The same partnership may serve deterrence, redundancy, diplomatic leverage, economic modernization, or neutrality.

This distinction is important for the concept of strategic redundancy developed in this article. Hedging concerns managing uncertainty through multiple relationships, whereas strategic redundancy concerns constructing overlapping capabilities, partnerships, and institutional channels so that dependence on a single provider does not create unacceptable vulnerability. A state may therefore hedge without developing substantial security redundancy, while redundancy may involve multiple capabilities and partnerships without requiring deliberate ambiguity among competing powers.

Small-state security scholarship likewise demonstrates that smaller states can exercise agency through diplomacy, institutional participation, selective alignment, and external partnerships (Weitsman, 2013). This perspective is particularly relevant to Qatar and Oman, but it generally explains how smaller states exercise agency rather than how different forms of agency become consolidated into distinct doctrines across states occupying different positions within a common security environment.

Taken together, these approaches establish three propositions. First, common threats and institutional alignment do not necessarily produce strategic uniformity. Second, states interpret external pressures through historically and institutionally specific contexts. Third, states can manage dependence through different combinations of adaptation, diversification, autonomy, diplomacy, and external partnerships. What remains insufficiently specified is how differentiated responses become persistent and institutionally embedded as distinct national security doctrines while the underlying U.S.-anchored security architecture remains intact.

### 2.3. Security Fragmentation as a Distinct Analytical Concept

Security fragmentation refers to an observable condition in which states remain institutionally aligned within a common or overlapping U.S.-anchored security architecture while developing persistent and institutionalized differences in threat interpretation, deterrence strategy, assessments of external security reliability, and approaches to strategic autonomy. It therefore captures a specific relationship between continued institutional alignment and persistent doctrinal divergence.

Security fragmentation does not describe alliance failure, withdrawal, institutional breakdown, or short-term variation in crisis behavior. Three characteristics are essential: states remain embedded in continuing security relationships; broadly comparable external pressures are interpreted through nationally specific political, institutional, material, and historical contexts; and resulting differences persist across policy episodes and become embedded in organizational practices, strategic planning, procurement, diplomatic routines, or repeated responses to security crises.

The concept is best understood as an outcome pattern, rather than an independent causal mechanism. The proposed mechanism links comparable external pressures to doctrinal divergence through nationally specific interpretation, strategic adaptation, organizational learning, and institutionalization. Section 5 develops and empirically tests the full causal sequence.

Security fragmentation relates to, but differs from, established concepts. Strategic culture helps explain the interpretive foundations of national strategic behavior; alliance heterogeneity recognizes variation among members of common security arrangements; strategic adaptation captures responses to changing conditions; and hedging, diversification, and strategic autonomy describe forms of external and domestic security behavior. Small-state approaches highlight agency among states with limited material capabilities. Security fragmentation brings these insights into a more specific analytical relationship by focusing on the institutionalization of divergent doctrines within a continuing security architecture.

The contribution is therefore not simply to identify different Gulf strategies, but to specify when intra-alliance or intra-architecture variation becomes durable and institutionally embedded without producing institutional separation. The central question is why repeated differences in threat interpretation, expectations concerning external protection, and strategic adaptation become relatively durable national security doctrines while the underlying security architecture remains intact.

The concept is also empirically contestable. If broadly comparable external pressures produce sustained doctrinal convergence across the cases, the claim of security fragmentation would be weakened. Likewise, if differences can be explained primarily by material or structural variables—including military capability, geography, economic exposure, relations with Iran, leadership, regime characteristics, or bilateral security relationships with Washington—without evidence that nationally specific interpretive and institutional processes contribute to the outcomes, its explanatory value would be reduced. Security fragmentation is therefore proposed as a complementary analytical framework rather than a substitute for material, institutional, or strategic explanations.

Interpretive patterns are inferred from converging evidence across official discourse, institutional behavior, policy decisions, and repeated strategic practices rather than assumed access to private elite beliefs. Because official statements may perform signaling, diplomatic, or legitimating functions, they cannot alone establish underlying strategic interpretation. Section 3.2 details the methodological procedures used to reconstruct and evaluate these patterns.

### 2.4. Gulf Security Literature

Gulf security scholarship provides the empirical setting in which this theoretical problem becomes particularly visible. The literature has emphasized the importance of external protection, especially the U.S. military presence, in structuring the regional security order (Gause, 2010; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The GCC provides an institutional framework for consultation and security coordination among Gulf monarchies facing overlapping regional pressures (Legrenzi, 2015), but it has

not developed into a fully integrated collective-defense alliance comparable to NATO. Its members therefore share an institutional environment without necessarily adopting identical security priorities or doctrines.

Iran has remained a central reference point in Gulf security politics. Regional rivalry, maritime insecurity, proxy competition, and changing patterns of confrontation have shaped Gulf defense strategies and external partnerships (Gause, 2010; Ulrichsen, 2016). Existing scholarship has examined these dynamics primarily through foreign-policy behavior, regime strategy, alliance management, diplomatic positioning, and external alignment. The post-2011 period made these differences particularly visible as Gulf states expanded external partnerships, diversified defence relationships, and adopted different approaches to regional intervention and diplomacy (Ulrichsen, 2016; Wright, 2025). The 2017 Gulf crisis further demonstrated that GCC membership could coexist with sharp disagreements over regional alignments, threat perceptions, and security priorities (Bianco, 2020). Although reconciliation restored formal relations, it did not eliminate differences in national strategic orientations.

This literature establishes the empirical conditions from which the article's theoretical problem emerges. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman operate within overlapping security arrangements and maintain important relationships with the United States, yet they have developed different approaches to deterrence, external security dependence, diplomatic engagement, and strategic adaptation. The contribution is therefore not to demonstrate that Gulf states behave differently—a proposition already well established—but to explain how repeated differences in threat interpretation, assessments of alliance reliability, and strategic adaptation become organized into distinct doctrinal orientations while states remain embedded within a common or overlapping U.S.-anchored security architecture.

This question underpins the article's comparative analysis of how common structural pressures are interpreted, translated into policy, and institutionalized as differentiated security doctrines.

## 3. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design to explain why Gulf states embedded within the same U.S.-anchored security architecture have developed differentiated security doctrines despite prolonged exposure to the U.S.–Iran strategic rivalry. The analysis combines a theory-driven most-similar systems design (MSSD), structured, focused comparison, qualitative documentary analysis, and process tracing to examine how common external pressures are translated into divergent national security doctrines (George & Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011).

The state constitutes the case, while national security doctrine constitutes the unit of analysis. Security doctrine is understood as an institutionalized pattern of threat interpretation, deterrence preferences, assessments of external security relationships and guarantees, and strategic autonomy, expressed through official policy documents, defence planning, diplomatic practices, and crisis responses. The primary cases are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman. Case selection preceded identification of the doctrinal categories, reducing the risk of selecting cases on the dependent variable. The rationale for case inclusion, exclusion, and scope conditions is addressed in Section 3.1.

The selected cases share sufficiently important structural conditions to permit systematic comparison while retaining variation that can be evaluated as alternative explanations. All four are GCC members with sustained exposure to the U.S.–Iran rivalry and substantial security relationships with the United States. The design therefore seeks analytical leverage rather than statistical representativeness; it does not assume that the cases are identical across all potentially relevant dimensions.

The historical analysis covers 1979–2025. Section 6 treats the 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict separately as a time-bounded contemporary observation and prospective stress test rather than as historical evidence (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Comparative Case Selection and Variable Structure in the Most-Similar Systems Design

| Dimension | Saudi Arabia | UAE | Qatar | Oman | Bahrain | Kuwait | Analytical Treatment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **GCC membership** | Member | Member | Member | Member | Member | Member | Common condition |
| **U.S. security relationship** | Extensive defense cooperation and strategic partnership | Extensive defense cooperation and Al Dhafra/U.S. military cooperation | Major U.S. security partnership and Al Udeid base presence | Defense cooperation and security partnership | Hosts U.S. Fifth Fleet; highly institutionalized U.S. military presence | Long-standing U.S. security guarantee after 1990 invasion | Selection criterion |
| **Exposure to Iran–U.S. rivalry** | High: direct competition, infrastructure attacks, regional rivalry | High: maritime, proxy, and regional competition | Medium: security concerns combined with diplomatic engagement | Medium: proximity with cooperative relations | High: domestic-security and geopolitical exposure | High: historical vulnerability after Iraqi invasion | Shared structural pressure |
| **Strategic autonomy capacity** | High: military modernization and independent initiatives | High: diversified partnerships and military modernization | Medium: diplomatic rather than military autonomy | Medium: diplomatic autonomy | Limited by dependence on external protection | Limited by reliance on external guarantees | Case variation |
| **Primary security orientation** | Managed dependence | Strategic redundancy | Networked mediation | Institutionalized balancing diplomacy | Regime-security dependence | External protection dependence | Analytical classification |
| **Reason included/excluded** | Included | Included | Included | Included | Excluded: distinct regime-security and permanent U.S. military presence dynamics | Excluded: post-1990 invasion security trajectory creates a different causal pathway | Scope condition |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

Table 2 identifies the shared conditions that make the cases comparable and the differences that may provide alternative explanations. The MSSD is therefore used as a comparative strategy rather than a claim that the four cases constitute identical systems.

### *3.1. Case Selection, Scope Conditions, and Treatment of Non-Selected GCC Cases*

The selection of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman follows a theory-driven MSSD. The cases share GCC membership, prolonged exposure to the U.S.–Iran rivalry, extensive security relationships with Washington, and participation in a broadly common U.S.-anchored security architecture, while differing in threat perception, external security dependence, deterrence preferences, and strategic autonomy. This combination permits examination of how broadly comparable external pressures can produce differentiated security doctrines (George and Bennett, 2005).

The doctrinal categories were developed through comparative analysis of official policy documents, defence statements, diplomatic practices, and crisis responses rather than used as case-selection criteria. This sequencing reduces the risk of selecting cases on the basis of predetermined outcomes.

The study treats geography, military capability, economic resources, relations with Iran and Washington, state size, leadership, and regime characteristics as plausible alternative explanations or conditioning factors. The purpose is not to eliminate these differences but to assess whether they

sufficiently explain doctrinal variation or whether nationally specific interpretations of vulnerability, external security reliability, and strategic risk mediate their effects.

Bahrain and Kuwait were considered but excluded from the core comparison because their security trajectories involve distinctive causal dynamics. Bahrain's security posture has been strongly shaped by regime-security concerns, domestic political tensions, and the permanent U.S. Fifth Fleet presence. Kuwait's trajectory has been shaped by the 1990 Iraqi invasion and subsequent institutionalization of external security guarantees. Although both states share GCC membership and close relationships with Washington, these historically specific pathways introduce additional explanatory factors beyond the study's focus on doctrinal differentiation among states with greater room for strategic recalibration. Their exclusion is therefore a theoretically defined scope decision rather than an attempt to remove cases inconsistent with the argument.

### *3.2. Data Sources, Operationalization, and Analytical Strategy*

The empirical analysis relies exclusively on qualitative documentary evidence from publicly available primary and secondary sources. The historical corpus covers 1979–2025. The 2026 Iran–United States conflict is treated separately as a time-bounded contemporary observation, with analysis limited to developments documented through 31 July 2026. This distinction prevents ongoing events from being treated as settled historical outcomes.

Primary sources include government statements, foreign ministry communications, national security documents, defense policy statements, speeches by senior leaders, diplomatic communiqués, and other official policy materials. Secondary sources include reports from the International Crisis Group, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, governmental defense assessments, and peer-reviewed scholarship. These materials are treated as documentary evidence for reconstructing observable patterns of security cooperation, dependence, diplomatic engagement, and doctrinal development rather than as transparent representations of elite beliefs.

Arabic-language official documents were analyzed in their original language. Where official English translations were available, they were used for cross-reference; otherwise, translations were checked against the original Arabic texts to minimize interpretive distortion, particularly for concepts concerning threat perception, security guarantees, neutrality, deterrence, and strategic autonomy.

The state constitutes the case, while national security doctrine is the unit of analysis. Individual documents, policy decisions, diplomatic initiatives, defence arrangements, and crisis episodes constitute the observable evidence through which doctrinal trajectories are reconstructed. Doctrine is operationalized through four dimensions applied consistently across cases:

1. Threat perception: how governments identify, prioritize, and frame external security challenges.
2. Deterrence strategy: preferred mechanisms for managing insecurity, including military balancing, defensive capabilities, diplomatic engagement, mediation, and de-escalation.
3. External security dependence: the role assigned to external security providers and the perceived credibility, reliability, and responsiveness of security guarantees, particularly those associated with the United States.
4. Strategic autonomy: efforts to expand independent security capacity through diversified partnerships, indigenous capabilities, and autonomous diplomatic initiatives.

Together, these dimensions provide the common framework for reconstructing and comparing national security doctrines (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Analytical Model: Conditions, Interpretive Mechanism, Alternatives, and Outcome

| Variable | Analytical role | Expected relationship |
|---|---|---|
| Shared U.S.-anchored security architecture | Common structural condition | Creates a broadly shared institutional security environment |
| U.S.–Iran rivalry | Common external pressure | Generates comparable regional security pressures |
| Geography | Alternative/conditioning factor | Shapes exposure, vulnerability, and strategic constraints |
| Military capability | Alternative/conditioning factor | Shapes available deterrence and defense options |
| Economic resources/exposure | Alternative/conditioning factor | Conditions the capacity and incentives for security adaptation |
| Relations with Iran | Alternative/conditioning factor | Shape threat perception and the perceived costs of confrontation or accommodation |
| Relations with Washington | Alternative/conditioning factor | Shape assessments of external security reliability and dependence |
| State size | Alternative/conditioning factor | Shapes vulnerability, strategic depth, and available policy options |
| Leadership | Conditioning factor | Influences strategic priorities and interpretation |
| Regime characteristics | Conditioning factor | Shape domestic security priorities and institutional responses |
| Strategic interpretation inferred from observable evidence | Interpretive mechanism | Provides evidence of how common pressures are translated into differentiated assessments of threat, vulnerability, and external security reliability |
| Domestic institutions | Intervening/institutional mechanism | Filter and reproduce strategic interpretations through organizational practices |
| Security doctrine | Dependent variable | Represents the institutionalized outcome of differentiated strategic interpretation and adaptation |
| Security fragmentation | Higher-order outcome | Emerges when doctrinal divergence persists while the broader security architecture remains institutionally aligned |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

The analytical model does not assume that interpretation operates independently of material or institutional conditions. The empirical task is to determine whether material and structural variables sufficiently explain observed variation or whether nationally specific interpretive and institutional processes provide additional explanatory leverage. Security fragmentation is treated as the higher-order outcome that emerges when differentiated doctrines persist within a continuing security architecture.

Data were analyzed through qualitative documentary analysis, structured, focused comparison, and process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011). Documentary evidence was organized chronologically and coded deductively according to the four dimensions defined above. The analysis then reconstructed each doctrine within its historical sequence before conducting cross-case comparison. Process tracing examined a sequential chain linking changes in threat prioritization, assessments of external security reliability, strategic interpretation, policy adaptation, and subsequent institutionalization.

The process-tracing protocol was applied consistently across the four cases by identifying the hypothesized interpretive mechanism, relevant turning point, expected observable evidence, and principal alternative explanation (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Process-Tracing Strategy

| Case | Proposed Interpretive Mechanism | Critical Turning Point | Expected Observable Evidence | Principal Alternative Explanation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Saudi Arabia** | Vulnerability interpreted as a need for greater response-time capacity | 2019 Abqaiq–Khurais attacks | Increased investment in integrated air defence, infrastructure protection, and rapid-response capability | Material capability |
| **United Arab Emirates** | Strategic uncertainty interpreted as a need for diversification and redundancy | Regional crises after 2011 | Expansion of diversified defence partnerships and multi-vector security cooperation | Economic modernization |
| **Qatar** | Isolation risk interpreted as a need for networked mediation | 2017 Gulf crisis | Institutionalization of mediation and diplomatic connectivity | International branding strategy |
| **Oman** | Escalation risk interpreted as a need for institutionalized balancing diplomacy | Long-term regional crises since 1979 | Continued mediation, balanced diplomacy, and de-escalatory engagement during crises | Limited military capability |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

The mechanisms in Table 4 are analytical propositions reconstructed from observable sequences of events and policy responses, not direct evidence of private elite beliefs. Because elite interpretations cannot be observed directly, strategic interpretation is inferred from convergence across official documents, policy decisions, institutional behaviour, diplomatic initiatives, defence agreements, and repeated strategic practices.

Evidence was evaluated using established process-tracing logic (Collier, 2011). Evidence functions primarily as straw-in-the-wind or hoop-test evidence, while particularly strong evidence closely linking a turning point to a subsequent policy shift may approach smoking-gun status. For example, Saudi Arabia's post-Abqaiq investment in integrated air defence and infrastructure protection provides stronger support for the proposed interpretation of vulnerability than a general statement of concern. Such evidence remains probabilistic because publicly available sources cannot completely exclude competing explanations (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Coding Framework for Security Doctrine Analysis

| Dimension | Indicator | Evidence Sources | Coding Rule | Example |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Threat perception** | Identification and prioritization of security threats | Government statements, national security documents, defence strategies | Coded when a threat is repeatedly identified as a central security concern across multiple documents and periods | Iran identified as a primary regional security challenge |
| **Deterrence strategy** | Preferred mechanism for managing insecurity | Defense policies, military statements, crisis responses | Coded according to the dominant security approach emphasized by policymakers and reflected in policy behavior | Missile defence, military modernization, mediation, or de-escalation |

| Dimension | Indicator | Evidence Sources | Coding Rule | Example |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **External security dependence** | Perceptions of external security guarantees and reliance on partners | Defence agreements, official statements, security cooperation documents | Coded when evidence demonstrates expectations regarding external protection, security guarantees, or the reliability of external security relationships | Continued reliance on U.S. defence cooperation |
| **Strategic autonomy** | Efforts to increase independent security capacity | Defence procurement, diplomatic initiatives, partnership agreements | Coded when states pursue capabilities or relationships designed to reduce dependence on a single security provider | Diversified partnerships and indigenous defence development |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

Coding followed a deductive approach, with categories derived from the theoretical framework before the empirical comparison. Additional themes emerging from the documentary record were incorporated through secondary inductive coding when they provided evidence of changing interpretations, policy adaptation, or doctrinal development. Coding was conducted manually using structured Excel matrices. Each document was assigned a country, date, source type, analytical dimension, and coding category. Two coding rounds were conducted, ambiguous cases were reviewed, and a coding protocol specified inclusion criteria and decision rules.

Evidence was triangulated across multiple documentary sources rather than relying on isolated statements or individual policy events. Longitudinal comparison across successive regional crises was used to distinguish repeated policy and institutional behaviour from short-term political signalling or strategic ambiguity. Consistent application of the coding and process-tracing protocols provided procedural comparability across cases.

Because the study relies exclusively on publicly available documentary materials and involves no interviews, surveys, experiments, or collection of personal information, it did not require institutional ethics approval or informed consent under the applicable university research-ethics framework. No confidential or personally identifiable information was collected or analyzed.

Several limitations remain. Public sources provide limited access to confidential elite deliberations and may contain strategic ambiguity or deliberate signalling. The study therefore reconstructs observable interpretive patterns rather than claiming direct access to private elite cognition. It also does not systematically estimate the independent effects of external actors such as China and Russia; it treats these as contextual influences rather than primary explanatory variables. These limitations constrain causal certainty but do not prevent systematic comparison of doctrinal trajectories across the four cases (George & Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011).

## 4. Historical Development of Gulf Security Doctrines, 1979–2025

This section examines how Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Oman developed distinct security doctrines while operating within the same U.S.-anchored security architecture. All four states faced broadly comparable structural conditions, including proximity to Iran, regional conflict, dependence on external security providers, and uncertainty about external protection. Yet their responses diverged. Material and institutional conditions shaped the strategic environment but did not alone determine how governments interpreted vulnerability or translated pressure into policy. Geography, military capability, economic resources, state size, leadership, regime characteristics, and relations with Iran and Washington therefore remain important alternative explanations. The analysis asks whether these factors alone explain doctrinal variation or whether nationally specific interpretations of vulnerability and external security reliability mediated their effects.

The analysis follows a process-tracing sequence across four cases: initial security condition, critical turning point, interpretation of vulnerability, policy adaptation, institutionalization, alternative explanation, and doctrinal inference. The historical reconstruction covers developments through 2025; Section 6 examines the ongoing 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict separately as a time-bounded, provisional observation.

### *4.1. Saudi Arabia: Managed Dependence*

Saudi Arabia entered the post-1979 period with reliance on the United States for military cooperation, advanced weapons, training, and security support. Proximity to Iran and vulnerability to attacks on critical energy infrastructure created significant risks, while Saudi Arabia's economic resources provided considerable capacity for defense investment. These conditions established the material context of security policy but did not predetermine its form. Over time, Saudi policy combined continued reliance on external protection with efforts to strengthen domestic capabilities for managing immediate threats. This pattern underpins the article's classification of Saudi Arabia as managed dependence.

The September 2019 attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities constituted a critical turning point. They exposed vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure despite extensive external defence relationships and military capabilities (Dahlgren, 2019; Gardner, 2019; Frantzman, 2019). Their significance was not simply a gap in defensive capability. They highlighted the temporal limits of external protection: security partnerships may provide substantial protection while leaving the state responsible for detecting, absorbing, and responding to the initial phase of an attack before external assistance can be fully mobilized. The episode therefore provided observable evidence for examining how Saudi Arabia understood the limits of external security dependence.

Subsequent adaptation included defence localization, domestic military production, maintenance capacity, and critical-infrastructure protection. Vision 2030 set a target to localize more than 50 percent of military expenditure by 2030. The creation of Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) in 2017 and expansion of the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) provided institutional mechanisms for pursuing this objective (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016; Public Investment Fund [PIF], 2017). By the end of 2024, official localization of military spending had reached 24.89 percent, up from about 4 percent in 2018 (General Authority for Military Industries, 2025). The persistence of these initiatives indicates institutionalization beyond a short-term response to the 2019 attacks. Nevertheless, procurement and localization do not automatically establish doctrinal change; their significance lies in their repeated alignment with efforts to increase national capacity while preserving external security relationships.

Leadership and material resources provide important alternative explanations. Mohammed bin Salman accelerated defence-industrialization policies, while Saudi Arabia's economic resources enabled sustained investment. The continuing Iranian threat also supplied a material rationale for strengthening defensive capabilities. These factors help explain the capacity, timing, and scale of adaptation, but not fully why it took the form of strengthening domestic capacity without abandoning external protection. The doctrinal inference therefore rests on the repeated combination of external dependence, domestic capacity-building, and efforts to reduce vulnerability within that dependence.

Negative evidence further qualifies this interpretation. Saudi Arabia did not pursue comprehensive strategic autonomy. It continued to rely heavily on foreign defence capabilities, arms suppliers, military cooperation, and external security partnerships. The restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran in 2023 also indicates that Saudi strategy cannot be reduced to permanent confrontation (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023; Aboudouh, 2024). Diplomatic engagement and domestic defensive capacity address different dimensions of vulnerability: reducing tensions can lower the probability and costs of prolonged confrontation, while domestic capabilities can improve the ability to manage immediate shocks. Their coexistence therefore reduces vulnerability without severing external dependence.

The evidence is consistent with managed dependence: continued external security protection combined with deliberate efforts to increase national capacity within that relationship. This category is an analytical construct developed in the study, not a formally declared Saudi doctrine. Its distinguishing feature is managing, rather than eliminating, the vulnerabilities associated with dependence. Within this pattern, response-time sovereignty refers more narrowly to the capacity to detect, absorb, and respond to the initial phase of a crisis before external assistance becomes fully operational. It is not a separate doctrine or equivalent to strategic autonomy. Saudi Arabia is therefore best understood as increasing immediate security-response capacity while preserving the advantages of external protection.

### *4.2. United Arab Emirates: Strategic Redundancy*

The UAE developed amid a small territorial and demographic scale, substantial economic resources, and dependence on external security providers. The 1990–1991 Gulf War marked an important turning point in the institutionalization of the U.S.–UAE security relationship. The 1994 Defense Cooperation Agreement established a structured framework for military cooperation, including training, exercises, access to advanced weapons, and U.S. military equipment; it was renewed in 2019 (United Arab Emirates Embassy, n.d.). These developments demonstrate sustained institutional alignment with the United States but not exclusive dependence on Washington.

The subsequent trajectory combined indigenous capability development with expanded external security relationships. Particularly after 2011, during the period associated with Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), the UAE accelerated military modernization, defense-industrial development, and international security engagement (Ulrichsen, 2016; Roberts, 2023). Investments included air and missile defense, precision-strike capabilities, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, command and control, and critical-infrastructure protection, alongside continued procurement from external suppliers (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2025). Cooperation with France, India, and other partners expanded alongside the U.S. relationship (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024). Together, these developments increased indigenous capacity while distributing security capabilities and relationships across multiple channels.

This pattern is distinct from hedging. Hedging generally describes flexibility through simultaneous pursuit of competing or partially competing relationships under uncertainty. Strategic redundancy, as used here, refers more specifically to overlapping security capabilities and external relationships that reduce the consequences of the failure, withdrawal, or unreliability of any single provider. It therefore concerns distribution of dependence rather than independence from external security relationships.

Economic resources constitute an important alternative explanation. The UAE's wealth and global economic integration facilitated access to advanced technologies, defence procurement, and international partnerships. Yet many relevant relationships were specifically organized around defence capabilities, military cooperation, intelligence, strategic technologies, and security coordination. Economic resources therefore enabled the strategy, while their security-oriented application provides evidence for a more specific diversification process.

The UAE's relationship with Iran further qualifies the interpretation. The UAE has combined close security cooperation with Washington and substantial military capabilities with diplomatic engagement and periods of de-escalation toward Tehran. Diversification therefore did not necessarily entail fixed confrontation. Instead, multiple security relationships and capabilities expanded the range of responses available under changing conditions. The process-tracing sequence—from intensified regional uncertainty through expanded capabilities and partnerships to institutionalized multiple security channels—is consistent with strategic redundancy. However, it does not establish direct access to elite perceptions or prove that leaders consciously pursued redundancy as a formally articulated doctrine. The inference rests on converging policy decisions, procurement patterns, defence relationships, institutional development, and repeated behaviour.

The doctrinal inference is therefore strategic redundancy. Unlike Saudi Arabia's managed dependence, which emphasizes domestic capacity while retaining central reliance on an external provider, the UAE distributes security capacity and external relationships across overlapping channels. Strategic redundancy thus represents risk distribution within the U.S.-anchored architecture rather than autonomy from it.

### *4.3. Qatar: Networked Mediation*

Qatar's security environment differed from that of its larger Gulf neighbours. Its small size, limited strategic depth, and constrained military capacity reduced the feasibility of relying primarily on independent military power. At the same time, Qatar remained deeply embedded in the U.S.-anchored security architecture and hosted a major U.S. military presence at Al Udeid Air Base. These conditions created incentives to complement external military protection with diplomatic and political connectivity.

The institutional basis for this approach predates the crises of the 2010s. Article 7 of Qatar's Constitution identifies mediation and peaceful settlement of international disputes as principles of foreign policy (State of Qatar, 2003). Qatar subsequently engaged in repeated mediation and facilitation involving Lebanon, Sudan, Afghanistan, and other conflicts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, n.d.). Their continuity and breadth indicate that mediation became a recurrent instrument for managing Qatar's external security environment.

The 2017 Gulf crisis provides the clearest turning point. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed or downgraded relations with Qatar, the crisis exposed the risks of regional isolation while highlighting the value of Qatar's broader diplomatic, economic, and security networks (Al-Saadi, 2021). Qatar responded by maintaining and expanding relationships beyond the immediate Gulf coalition. The continued external connectivity following the crisis suggests that reducing dependence on any single regional relationship became an increasingly important component of security adaptation.

This pattern was also evident in Qatar's continued relationship with the United States alongside communication with Iran and other actors whose interests did not always coincide with Washington or other Gulf states. Qatar's facilitation of U.S.–Taliban negotiations and hosting of talks culminating in the 2020 U.S.–Taliban agreement provide evidence of diplomatic access being converted into strategic utility (Kamrava, 2015; Roberts, 2017). More recent research likewise identifies mediation as an increasingly institutionalized component of Qatari foreign policy (Shpakovskaya & Gryzlov, 2025). These developments do not establish private beliefs; their recurrence across different episodes instead supports an inference of durable diplomatic connectivity.

The institutionalization of this practice is supported by constitutional recognition, repeated application across distinct conflicts, and continuity across leadership and crises. Qatar's mediation activities preceded Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's accession in 2013 and continued through the 2017 crisis and subsequent initiatives. This continuity suggests that networked mediation cannot be reduced to an individual leader's diplomatic style.

Small-state vulnerability and limited military capacity remain important alternative explanations. These conditions plausibly increased incentives for diplomatic activism, but do not by themselves account for repeated mediation, communication with actors on competing sides of regional disputes, and persistence across leadership periods. There is also important negative evidence: Qatar remains dependent on external military protection and has not pursued comprehensive military autonomy. Networked mediation should therefore be understood as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the U.S. security relationship. Its distinctive feature is the use of diplomatic connectivity across competing political networks to manage vulnerability.

### *4.4. Oman: Institutionalized Balancing Diplomacy*

Oman represents a distinctive pattern of security adaptation through diplomatic balancing within, rather than outside, the U.S.-anchored security architecture. Its proximity to Iran, strategic position near the Strait of Hormuz, and comparatively limited military capabilities created incentives to avoid direct entanglement in regional polarization. At the same time, Oman maintained security relationships with the United States and other Western and GCC partners. The historical record therefore supports a distinction between diplomatic autonomy and external defence dependence, rather than between alignment and legal neutrality.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran–Iraq War constituted an important formative period. During the 1980–1988 war, Oman maintained relations with Iran while participating in the emerging Gulf security framework (Ulrichsen, 2016). Rather than severing relations with Tehran or automatically aligning with efforts to isolate Iran, Muscat preserved diplomatic channels while maintaining external security relationships. This pattern is consistent with an early preference for limiting regional polarization and preserving diplomatic manoeuvre.

The 1990–1991 Gulf crisis further demonstrated that diplomatic flexibility did not require military isolation. Oman participated in Western and GCC security arrangements while retaining diplomatic space with competing regional actors. This coexistence became particularly visible in Oman's facilitation of U.S.–Iranian contacts preceding the negotiations that produced the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Repeated use of diplomatic access during periods of tension is consistent with diplomacy functioning as risk management and escalation control rather than merely rhetorical neutrality (Ulrichsen, 2016; Şen, 2022).

The Yemen war provided another important test of these differentiated approaches to regional security. When Saudi Arabia and its partners intervened in Yemen in 2015, Saudi Arabia pursued a more direct security response to what it regarded as significant regional and security threats, while Oman did not participate militarily and instead maintained communication with actors across the conflict divide. This difference illustrates how Gulf states could respond to the same regional crisis through distinct approaches to security management. Oman's separation between participation in external defence relationships and automatic alignment with regional military coalitions is consistent with balancing diplomacy as an active form of risk management rather than passive nonalignment.

The transition from Sultan Qaboos to Sultan Haitham provides further evidence of institutionalization. Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes contemporary foreign policy as rooted in principles associated with Qaboos and upheld and developed under Haitham, emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman, 2025a). Continuity across the leadership transition suggests that balancing diplomacy became embedded in state practice rather than depending exclusively on one ruler. The Haitham period should nevertheless be understood as adaptation and consolidation rather than simple replication of Qaboos-era policy (Gutiérrez de Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024).

Limited military capability is an important alternative explanation. Material constraints may have reduced the feasibility of confrontation, but they do not fully explain repeated preservation of diplomatic access while Oman maintained external defence cooperation, nor continuity across the leadership transition. Oman's continuing relationship with the United States, including military access arrangements and the 2019 Strategic Framework Agreement, further indicates that diplomatic balancing cannot be reduced to military weakness or comprehensive nonalignment (Sharp, 2025).

The evidence is consistent with institutionalized balancing diplomacy: sustained engagement with competing regional actors, avoidance of automatic participation in military coalitions, continued external defence cooperation, and repeated diplomatic engagement during periods of tension. The proposed mechanism is not withdrawal from the U.S.-anchored architecture but the institutionalized separation of diplomatic positioning from defence dependence. The longitudinal sequence from the 1979 Revolution and Iran–Iraq War through post-Gulf War cooperation, U.S.–Iranian contacts, the Yemen conflict, and the Qaboos–Haitham transition supports this interpretation, while not establishing a single consistent private doctrine among Omani leaders.

### 4.5. Comparative Process-Tracing Findings

The four cases reveal distinct patterns of doctrinal adaptation under broadly comparable structural conditions. Saudi Arabia interpreted vulnerability through limits in immediate response capacity and strengthened domestic resilience while retaining external protection. The UAE responded to risks associated with reliance on a single security channel by developing overlapping capabilities and partnerships. Qatar addressed vulnerability through diplomatic connectivity and mediation to reduce isolation. Oman treated polarization and military entanglement as sources of vulnerability and institutionalized balancing diplomacy while retaining external defence cooperation (Table 6).

Table 6 summarizes the process-tracing evidence.

Table 6. Process-Tracing Evidence Across the Four Cases

| Case | Critical turning point | Interpretation | Policy adaptation | Main alternative | Negative evidence | Doctrinal inference |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Saudi Arabia | 2019 Abqaiq–Khurais | Limits of immediate external response | Localization, infrastructure protection, domestic production | Resources, Iranian threat, leadership | Continued external dependence; Iran rapprochement | Managed dependence |
| UAE | 1990–91 Gulf War; post-2011 crises | Risk of reliance on one channel | Military modernization; diversified partnerships | Economic resources, internationalization | Continued U.S. dependence; Iran engagement | Strategic redundancy |
| Qatar | 2017 Gulf crisis | Diplomatic and regional isolation | Mediation; diversified diplomatic ties | Small-state diplomacy, limited military capacity | Continued U.S. protection | Networked mediation |
| Oman | 1979 Revolution/ Iran–Iraq War; later crises | Polarization, escalation, entanglement | Cross-bloc diplomacy; mediation; de-escalation | Limited capability, geography | Continued Western defence cooperation; GCC participation | Institutionalized balancing diplomacy |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

Faculty of Political Science
University of Belgrade

The comparison indicates that these doctrines cannot be reduced to generic concepts such as diversification, hedging, balancing, or strategic autonomy. Managed dependence combines domestic response capacity with continued external protection; strategic redundancy distributes security dependence across multiple channels; networked mediation manages vulnerability through diplomatic connectivity; and institutionalized balancing diplomacy preserves diplomatic autonomy while limiting escalation and entanglement.

These categories are not mutually exclusive descriptions of every policy action. They identify the dominant interpretive and institutionalized patterns through which each state manages vulnerability. Material and institutional conditions—including geography, military capability, economic resources, state size, leadership, regime characteristics, and relations with Iran and Washington—remain conditioning factors. The process-tracing evidence nevertheless suggests that these conditions do not alone account for the observed variation; they are filtered through nationally specific assessments of vulnerability and external security reliability.

The historical evidence is therefore consistent with a sequence of shared structural pressures → nationally specific interpretation → differentiated policy adaptation → institutional reinforcement → doctrinal differentiation. It supports a plausible interpretive explanation rather than demonstrating that interpretation is the sole cause of doctrinal variation. Continued external dependence and contradictory policy behaviour further indicate that the four doctrines should be understood as durable strategic orientations rather than exclusive categories.

These historically reconstructed doctrines provide the baseline for Section 6's analysis of the ongoing 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict. Because that conflict remains ongoing, the 2026 evidence is treated as a

time-bounded and provisional observation rather than evidence of completed post-conflict doctrinal change.

## 5. From Common External Pressures to Divergent Doctrines: Explaining Security Fragmentation

Having established the distinct security orientations of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman, this section explains how comparable external pressures can generate divergent security doctrines within a shared U.S.-anchored security architecture. The central argument is that external pressures do not translate directly into policy. Rather, they are filtered through nationally specific political and institutional contexts, producing differentiated assessments of threat, vulnerability, and external security guarantees. These assessments shape strategic adaptation, which, through repetition and organizational learning, can become institutionalized as durable security doctrines.

The causal process can be summarized as follows: comparable external pressures lead to nationally specific interpretive filters, which result in varied assessments of vulnerability and security guarantees. This then prompts strategic adaptation, organizational learning, and institutionalization, eventually causing doctrinal divergence and security fragmentation. The sequence is not deterministic. Material and institutional conditions shape the strategic environment throughout, but they do not necessarily determine how states interpret vulnerability or translate comparable pressures into doctrine (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Causal Mechanism of Security Fragmentation**

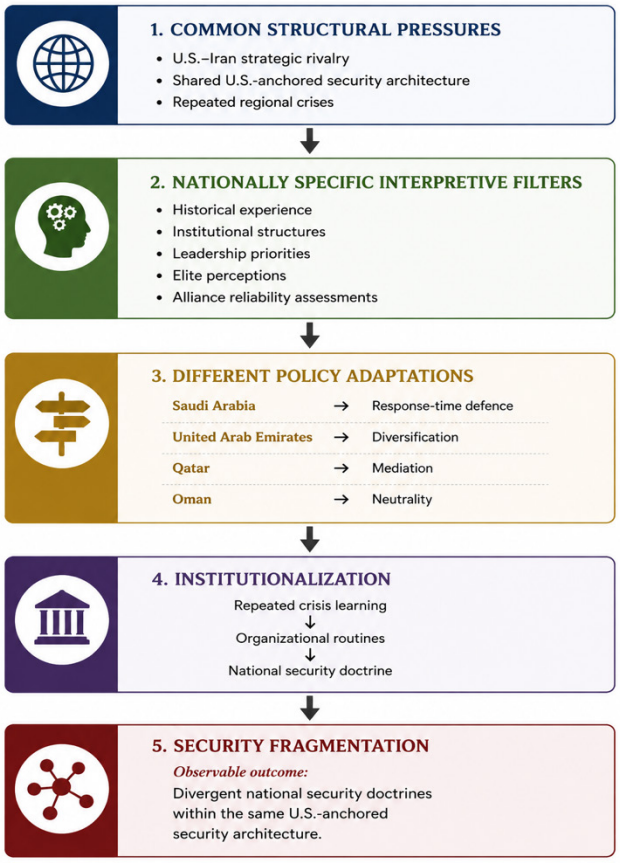



**Figure 1.** Causal Mechanism of Security Fragmentation

### 5.1. Interpretive Filtering and Threat Prioritization

External pressures acquire strategic meaning through nationally specific interpretive filters shaped by historical experience, institutional organization, leadership priorities, bureaucratic practices, and regime-security concerns. These processes operate within material constraints, including geography, military capability, economic resources, state size, and relations with Iran and Washington. Such conditions affect available strategic options, while interpretation influences how governments understand and respond to them.

Across the four cases, comparable regional pressures were therefore associated with different assessments of vulnerability and strategic risk. Saudi Arabia emphasized domestic capacity while retaining external security dependence; the UAE developed overlapping security relationships; Qatar cultivated diplomatic connectivity across competing networks; and Oman prioritized diplomatic autonomy and de-escalation while retaining external defence cooperation.

Historical experience helps explain these differences. Repeated attacks on critical infrastructure can heighten perceptions of territorial and infrastructural vulnerability; experiences of regional isolation can increase the value of diplomatic connectivity; sustained exposure to regional polarization can reinforce preferences for de-escalation; and uncertainty about external protection can encourage diversification of security relationships. These patterns are consistent with an interpretive process in which external pressures become strategically consequential when incorporated into nationally specific understandings of vulnerability and risk (Gause, 2010; Roberts, 2023; Bianco, 2020; Legrenzi, 2015).

Interpretive filtering therefore constitutes the first stage of the proposed mechanism: it helps explain why comparable pressures generate different strategic priorities and, subsequently, different assessments of security guarantees and policy responses.

### 5.2. Differentiated Security-Guarantee Assessment and Strategic Adaptation

Threat assessments shape how states evaluate the reliability, responsiveness, and limits of external security guarantees. Although the four cases remain embedded within a common U.S.-anchored security architecture, institutional alignment does not require identical assessments of external protection. States may therefore remain dependent on the same security provider while adopting different strategies for managing that dependence (Lake, 2011; Snyder, 1997).

The critical causal link is how governments assess what external protection can and cannot provide. Where protection is perceived as insufficiently responsive to particular vulnerabilities, governments have greater incentives to strengthen domestic capabilities. Where dependence on a single provider is perceived as a source of uncertainty, diversification can reduce vulnerability. Where diplomatic isolation is understood as a significant security risk, access to multiple political networks can provide an additional form of protection. Conversely, where escalation and entanglement are perceived as major vulnerabilities, diplomatic autonomy and balanced engagement may become preferred instruments of risk management.

These assessments are associated with distinct patterns of strategic adaptation. Saudi Arabia's managed dependence combines continued reliance on external protection with efforts to strengthen domestic capabilities. The UAE's strategic redundancy distributes security reliance across overlapping military, technological, and diplomatic channels. Qatar's networked mediation uses diplomatic connectivity and access to multiple political networks to reduce vulnerability to isolation while retaining external military protection. Oman's institutionalized balancing diplomacy combines diplomatic autonomy, de-escalation, and cross-bloc engagement with continued external defence cooperation (Goh, 2007; Snyder, 1997; Lake, 2011).

These categories identify analytically distinct patterns of vulnerability management rather than synonyms for diversification, hedging, balancing, or strategic autonomy. Those broader concepts describe forms of strategic behaviour that may appear across cases, whereas the categories developed here identify the dominant mechanisms through which each state repeatedly manages vulner-

ability within the shared security architecture. A state may therefore diversify partnerships or hedge against uncertainty without that behaviour alone determining its broader doctrinal classification.

Strategic adaptation constitutes the second stage of the causal sequence. Security interpretation shapes the problem governments seek to manage; assessments of external security reliability influence the instruments considered appropriate; and repeated policy choices provide observable evidence of adaptation and subsequent doctrinal institutionalization. The evidence is therefore used to reconstruct these relationships rather than to treat policy behaviour as direct evidence of private elite cognition.

### *5.3. Organizational Learning and Doctrinal Institutionalization*

Strategic adaptation becomes doctrinally significant when similar responses are repeatedly reproduced across successive crises and incorporated into organizational practices. Repetition creates opportunities for organizational learning: governments assess previous experiences, modify existing practices, and institutionalize responses considered effective. Over time, these patterns may become embedded in defence planning, diplomatic institutions, procurement strategies, and national security routines.

A single procurement decision, diplomatic initiative, or crisis response does not establish a national security doctrine. Stronger evidence emerges when similar policy choices recur across successive episodes, receive organizational reinforcement, and persist despite changes in individual crises or leadership. Continuity across institutional practices, strategic planning, procurement priorities, diplomatic routines, and crisis responses therefore provides a stronger basis for inferring that a strategic logic has become embedded within state institutions.

This distinction separates institutionalized doctrine from short-term strategic behaviour. The relevant evidence is not an individual policy decision but the repeated reproduction of a strategic logic across different conditions. The four doctrines identified in Section 4 are therefore treated as cumulative strategic orientations rather than fixed national characteristics.

Alternative explanations remain important. Material capabilities, geography, economic resources, state size, relations with Iran and Washington, leadership, regime characteristics, and military constraints may shape the feasibility and costs of particular strategies. These factors are treated as conditioning or alternative explanations rather than assumed to be absent. The empirical question is whether they adequately account for the observed doctrinal differences or whether their effects are mediated by nationally specific interpretations of vulnerability, external security reliability, and strategic risk.

Oman illustrates this distinction. Limited military capabilities may have encouraged diplomatic restraint, but the repeated preservation of balanced engagement and diplomatic access across successive crises, including the transition from Sultan Qaboos to Sultan Haitham, is consistent with an interpretation in which material constraints conditioned strategy without fully accounting for its institutional continuity. The same analytical logic applies across the other cases: material resources, geographic exposure, and external security relationships constrain available choices, but they do not necessarily explain why particular responses are repeatedly selected and reinforced.

### *5.4. From Doctrinal Divergence to Security Fragmentation*

The resulting doctrinal differences can be summarized across four analytical dimensions (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Cross-Case Comparison of Gulf Security Doctrines

| Country | Primary vulnerability | Vulnerability-management mechanism | Relationship to external security | Dominant doctrine |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Saudi Arabia** | Infrastructural vulnerability | Domestic capacity within continued dependence | Continued U.S. security relationship | Managed dependence |
| **UAE** | Strategic uncertainty and concentration risk | Overlapping military, technological, and diplomatic channels | Multiple, overlapping security relationships | Strategic redundancy |
| **Qatar** | Small-state vulnerability | Connectivity across competing political networks | Strong U.S. protection with diversified diplomatic relations | Networked mediation |
| **Oman** | Escalation and entanglement risk | Diplomatic autonomy and de-escalatory engagement | External defence cooperation without automatic alignment | Institutionalized balancing diplomacy |

Source: Author's compilation based on the evidence presented in the article.

These categories represent dominant strategic orientations rather than exclusive patterns of behaviour. Each state combines elements of dependence, diversification, diplomacy, and external cooperation; the categories are distinguished by the dominant mechanisms through which vulnerability is managed.

Taken together, the evidence is consistent with security fragmentation as a condition in which differentiated national security doctrines persist alongside continued institutional alignment. The four states remain embedded within the broader U.S.-anchored security architecture while developing different interpretations of vulnerability, different assessments of external security guarantees and relationships, and different approaches to managing insecurity.

The comparative sequence is cumulative rather than mechanically linear: comparable pressures are filtered through nationally specific institutional and interpretive contexts; these differences shape assessments of vulnerability and external security reliability; those assessments inform strategic adaptation; and repeated adaptations can become organizationally reinforced and institutionalized as relatively durable doctrines. Security fragmentation emerges when such doctrinal differentiation persists despite continued participation in a common security architecture and sustained bilateral or multilateral security relationships.

This argument does not imply that material or institutional conditions are irrelevant. Geography, military capability, economic resources, regime characteristics, and relations with Iran and Washington shape the strategic environment, constrain available choices, and affect the costs of alternative strategies. The evidence instead suggests that these conditions do not, by themselves, fully account for the observed doctrinal variation. The additional explanatory value of security fragmentation lies in identifying how comparable pressures can be interpreted and managed differently, producing persistent doctrinal divergence while the broader security architecture remains institutionally durable.

## 6. 2026 Conflict as a Provisional Stress Test

The 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict provides a contemporary stress test of the security-fragmentation framework developed in this article. Unlike the historical analysis covering 1979–2025, the 2026 analysis concerns an ongoing conflict and therefore cannot be treated as a settled historical outcome. The evidence is limited to developments documented during the observation period, and all conclusions concerning 2026 remain provisional because the conflict and its regional consequences continue to evolve.

The purpose of this section is not to predict precisely how the four states will behave or to treat the 2026 conflict as definitive proof of the theory. Rather, it examines whether the historically reconstructed doctrines provide a plausible framework for interpreting differentiated responses to a com-

mon or comparable external shock. Where observed behaviour remains consistent with historically established patterns, it provides provisional supporting evidence; where it diverges, it identifies conditions under which those doctrines may adapt or change.

### *6.1. Saudi Arabia: Managed Dependence*

The historically reconstructed Saudi pattern combines reliance on external security provision with efforts to strengthen domestic capacity to manage vulnerability. Under intensified regional insecurity, the framework therefore expects Saudi Arabia to preserve its security relationship with the United States while emphasizing territorial protection, critical infrastructure security, air and missile defense, and defensive resilience.

This response would be consistent with managed dependence: maintaining external protection while reducing vulnerabilities associated with dependence on a foreign security provider (Lake, 2011). Evidence that Saudi Arabia continues to combine U.S. security cooperation with domestic capability-building would provisionally support this interpretation. Conversely, sustained movement toward either substantially greater strategic autonomy or deeper dependence would indicate that the doctrine is adapting.

### *6.2. UAE: Strategic Redundancy*

The UAE's historically reconstructed orientation emphasizes overlapping security relationships and diversified external partnerships. Under intensified confrontation, the framework therefore expects the UAE to preserve its security relationship with the United States while maintaining alternative diplomatic, economic, and security channels.

Such behavior would be consistent with strategic redundancy, whereby multiple external relationships preserve strategic options and reduce vulnerability to disruption in any single partnership (Goh, 2007; Roberts, 2023). The 2026 conflict consequently provides a provisional test of whether this diversification constitutes an institutionalized security orientation. If the UAE instead moves toward a single dominant security alignment, the explanatory value of strategic redundancy would be weakened.

Faculty of Security Studies
University of Belgrade

### *6.3. Qatar: Networked Mediation*

Qatar's historically reconstructed pattern emphasizes diplomatic connectivity, mediation, and maintaining communication channels across competing political relationships. Under intensified Iran–U.S. confrontation, the framework therefore expects Qatar to preserve its security relationship with the United States while maintaining channels with Iran and other regional actors.

Continued reliance on mediation and diplomatic connectivity would be consistent with networked mediation, in which diplomatic access functions as an instrument of security management (Bianco, 2020). However, such behavior may also reflect regime security, reputational strategy, diplomatic leverage, or small-state foreign-policy objectives. The 2026 evidence must therefore be treated cautiously and cannot by itself establish that mediation constitutes a distinct security doctrine.

### *6.4. Oman: Institutionalized Balancing Diplomacy*

Oman's case concerns the durability of an established orientation rather than the emergence of a new one. Its historical pattern combines external security relationships with diplomatic engagement across competing regional and international actors. Under intensified conflict, the framework therefore expects Oman to preserve communication with competing parties, avoid unnecessary strategic entanglement, and use diplomatic channels to reduce escalation while maintaining external security cooperation (Legrenzi, 2015).

Evidence of continued balancing and diplomatic engagement would support institutionalized balancing diplomacy. Significant movement toward sustained alignment with one side, however, would suggest that intensified conflict has altered the conditions supporting Oman's established orientation.

### *6.5. Comparative Implications*

The 2026 conflict provides an opportunity to assess whether historically differentiated doctrines remain visible under severe and comparable external pressure. The expectations are not deterministic: Saudi Arabia's pattern emphasizes defensive resilience alongside external protection; the UAE's emphasizes overlapping security channels; Qatar's emphasizes diplomatic connectivity; and Oman's emphasizes balancing and de-escalation. These orientations may coexist with tactical adaptation or temporary departures from established patterns.

The causal sequence developed in this section links common or comparable external pressure to differentiated outcomes through nationally specific interpretive filters, assessments of vulnerability and alliance reliability, policy adaptation, and institutionalization. The 2026 conflict permits examination of this sequence under heightened pressure, but it cannot by itself establish long-term doctrinal institutionalization.

Accordingly, the 2026 evidence remains provisional. Continued doctrinal differentiation would further support the proposition that institutional alignment can coexist with persistent divergence. Broad convergence would weaken the theory, while evidence that material or structural variables primarily explain differences would strengthen alternative explanations. The 2026 conflict should therefore be understood as an evolving empirical stress test whose ultimate significance will depend on whether differentiated responses persist, converge, or are reorganized as the conflict develops.

## 7. Security Fragmentation as a Theoretical Problem

Existing theories of alliance politics and hierarchical security orders explain how common threats, security guarantees, and asymmetric relationships can sustain cooperation and institutional alignment (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1997; Lake, 2011). Alliance scholarship, however, recognizes abandonment, entrapment, burden sharing, intra-alliance bargaining, autonomy seeking, hedging, and divergent threat perceptions. The theoretical problem addressed here is therefore more specific: how can institutional alignment persist while participating states develop durable differences in how they interpret threats, assess external security guarantees and alliance reliability, and manage insecurity?

Security fragmentation is defined here as the persistent coexistence of institutional alignment and doctrinal divergence within a shared security architecture. It is conceptualized as an outcome, not a causal mechanism. Institutional alignment refers to continued participation in security relationships involving a common or dominant security provider, including defence cooperation, security guarantees, military access, and institutional frameworks. Doctrinal divergence refers to durable differences in national security orientations on threat perception, deterrence, expectations of external protection, alliance reliability, and managing strategic vulnerability. Security fragmentation therefore does not imply alliance failure or institutional collapse. Its significance lies in the possibility that institutional continuity can coexist with differentiated national security doctrines.

The concept is distinct from several adjacent concepts. Strategic culture concerns historically developed patterns of strategic thought and practice, whereas security fragmentation concerns persistent doctrinal differentiation among states within a shared security architecture. Alliance heterogeneity identifies variation among alliance members but does not necessarily explain when such variation becomes durable doctrinal divergence. Strategic adaptation concerns changes in policy in response to changing circumstances, while fragmentation concerns differentiated and increasingly institutionalized outcomes of such adaptation. Hedging and strategic diversification describe strat-

egies for managing uncertainty through multiple relationships and capabilities; they are therefore not synonymous with fragmentation. A state may diversify its partnerships without developing a distinct doctrine, while doctrinal divergence may occur without extensive diversification.

The concept builds on rather than rejects existing alliance scholarship. States in asymmetric security relationships may seek protection from a dominant provider while preserving strategic room for manoeuvre. Small-state agency, alliance dilemmas, patron–client relations, intra-alliance contestation, and hedging therefore remain important explanations of variation within security relationships. Security fragmentation specifies a particular outcome in which such variation becomes persistent and doctrinally embedded despite continued institutional alignment. The argument consequently does not assume that common external threats necessarily produce convergence. Comparative evidence also shows that institutional alignment can strengthen strategic convergence when consultation and coordination mechanisms are sufficiently institutionalized (Mulyanyuma, 2026). Instead, it asks how comparable pressures are interpreted differently and translated into durable national security doctrines.

The proposed causal sequence is: shared external pressure → nationally specific interpretation → differentiated assessments of vulnerability and alliance reliability → strategic adaptation → doctrinal institutionalization → persistent doctrinal divergence. Material and structural conditions remain important throughout this sequence. Geography, military capability, economic exposure, regime institutions, state size, and previous experiences of insecurity shape both pressures and available strategic options. The theoretical claim is not that interpretation replaces material explanation, but that material conditions do not automatically determine doctrinal outcomes; their effects may be mediated by nationally specific assessments of vulnerability, external protection, and strategic dependence. This interpretive dimension is consistent with scholarship showing that strategic preferences can incorporate identity and legitimacy alongside material security incentives rather than being determined by material pressures alone (Hetteh, 2026).

The 2017 GCC crisis provides an important setting for examining this relationship. GCC membership and continuing U.S. security relationships coexisted with sharp disagreements over regional alignments, threat perceptions, and security priorities. The episode therefore allows examination of whether institutional continuity can coexist with doctrinal divergence. It is not treated as automatic evidence of fragmentation, however, because the crisis could also reflect temporary regime competition, diplomatic conflict, or institutional disruption.

External partnerships similarly form part of the strategic environment. For smaller states in particular, multiple security relationships can expand strategic options and reduce dependence on a single source of protection (Pavić & Beriša, 2026). Relationships with Israel, Turkey, Pakistan, China, Russia, and European security partners may therefore alter Gulf states' strategic options and their dependence on the United States.

Such relationships are not themselves evidence of fragmentation. Diversification concerns the expansion of external partnerships and capabilities; fragmentation concerns whether resulting strategic choices become embedded in distinct national security doctrines. Diversification may therefore contribute to fragmentation without being equivalent to it.

### *7.1. Falsifiability and Observable Implications*

The argument is empirically falsifiable. Evidence supporting the theory would consist of persistent doctrinal differentiation under continued institutional alignment: states operating within comparable security arrangements develop durable differences in threat assessments, expectations of external protection, alliance-reliability judgments, deterrence strategies, and approaches to vulnerability. Evidence weakening the theory would arise if these differences were explained primarily by material or structural variables—such as geography, military capability, economic resources, state size, regime institutions, or formal alliance commitments—without evidence that nationally specific interpretive processes mediate those effects. Existing material or institutional explanations would

then provide a more parsimonious account. Evidence rejecting the theory would consist of broad doctrinal convergence among states facing comparable external pressures within a common security architecture.

Differences in isolated crisis behaviour would not, by themselves, establish security fragmentation. The relevant evidence must demonstrate persistence across episodes and institutionalization through repeated policy practices, institutional arrangements, or durable strategic orientations. Conversely, evidence that apparent doctrinal differences disappear once structural conditions are controlled would weaken the explanatory value of the concept.

Security fragmentation therefore identifies a distinct and testable outcome: institutional continuity accompanied by persistent doctrinal divergence. It does not replace theories of alliance politics, strategic culture, hedging, diversification, or strategic adaptation, but specifies a form of intra-architecture differentiation that these approaches do not fully capture.

## 8. Conclusion

This article examined why states embedded within the same U.S.-anchored security architecture and exposed to broadly comparable pressures arising from the long-term U.S.–Iran rivalry have nevertheless developed differentiated security doctrines. The historical analysis covering 1979–2025 suggests that comparable structural pressures did not produce uniform strategic responses. Rather, geography, military capability, economic resources, state size, leadership, regime characteristics, and relations with Iran and Washington interacted with nationally specific interpretations of vulnerability, external security reliability, and strategic risk. The evidence is therefore consistent with the argument that doctrinal differentiation emerged through the interaction of structural conditions, interpretation, policy adaptation, and institutionalization rather than material conditions alone.

The comparison identifies four relatively durable doctrinal orientations. Saudi Arabia's managed dependence combines continued reliance on external security relationships with efforts to strengthen domestic capacity, including initial crisis-response capability. The UAE's strategic redundancy distributes security dependence across overlapping military, technological, defence-industrial, and external security channels. Qatar's networked mediation uses diplomatic connectivity and access to competing political networks to reduce vulnerability to isolation while retaining external military protection. Oman's institutionalized balancing diplomacy separates diplomatic autonomy from defence dependence, using dialogue and de-escalation to reduce escalation and entanglement while maintaining external defence cooperation. These categories are analytically distinct orientations rather than exclusive descriptions of all state behaviour.

Taken together, the historical evidence is consistent with security fragmentation, understood as the coexistence of institutional continuity within a common security architecture and persistent divergence in national security doctrines. It is therefore an outcome or condition of intra-architecture doctrinal divergence, not a causal mechanism or a breakdown of the security architecture. The findings suggest that continued bilateral security relationships with the United States do not necessarily produce doctrinal convergence.

The 2026 Iran–U.S. conflict is treated separately from the historical analysis and does not alter the 1979–2025 findings. Evidence available through 31 July 2026 provides a time-bounded observation and stress test of the historically reconstructed doctrines rather than evidence of definitive post-2025 doctrinal transformation. Because the 2026 evidence remains time-bounded and subject to further development, conclusions concerning this period are necessarily provisional. The available evidence may indicate whether established doctrinal orientations remain visible under acute stress, but temporary crisis responses should not automatically be interpreted as durable doctrinal change.

The theoretical implication is that common security structures can accommodate persistent doctrinal divergence. The argument would be weakened if future evidence showed that differences among the cases were explained primarily by material or structural variables without meaningful

interpretive or institutional mediation. It would be challenged more directly by broad doctrinal convergence under comparable pressures.

Overall, the historical evidence indicates that Gulf security politics from 1979–2025 reflects differentiated national strategies within a continuing U.S.-anchored security architecture, rather than straightforward convergence or institutional breakdown. Future research should reassess the 2026 evidence as additional evidence becomes available and determine whether observed responses become institutionalized or remain temporary adaptations. The 2026 findings should therefore remain open to future updating.

**Author Contributions:** The author performed all aspects of the research, including conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and writing.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgment:** The author acknowledges that AI tools were used solely to assist with English translation, grammar correction, language improvement, and stylistic editing. AI tools also assisted with the language and presentation of the figure; however, the author developed and determined its content, structure, variables, classifications, and interpretation. The research design, data collection, source selection, coding framework, analysis, interpretation of evidence, theoretical development, and all substantive arguments and conclusions are entirely the author's own. AI tools did not contribute to the study's conceptualization, empirical analysis, process tracing, interpretation of findings, or development of the article's original theoretical arguments.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## 9. References

1. Aboudouh, A. (2024, April 19). *Iran–Israel exchanges are a test for China's influence in the Gulf*. Chatham House. Retrieved from https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/iran-israel-exchanges-are-test-chinas-influence-gulf.
2. Al-Saadi, M. (2021). Mediation in the Qatar blockade in the light of regional and international law. *International Review of Law, 10*(1), 107–142. https://doi.org/10.29117/irl.2021.0157.
3. Bianco, C. (2020, December 10). *Gulf of difference: How Europe can get the Gulf monarchies to pursue peace with Iran*. European Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Gulf-of-difference-How-Europe-can-get-the-Gulf-monarchies-to-pursue-peace-with-Iran.pdf.
4. Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Cha, V. D. (2016). *Powerplay: The origins of the American alliance system in Asia*. Princeton University Press.
6. Collier, D. (2011). Understanding process tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 44*(4), 823–830. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429.
7. Cvetković, V. (2026). Disaster Risk Management: Theory, Concepts and Methods. Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management, Belgrade.
8. Dahlgren, M. (2019, September 16). *Houthis strike Saudi oil infrastructure*. CSIS Missile Threat. Retrieved from https://missilethreat.csis.org/houthis-strike-saudi-oil-infrastructure/.
9. Edmond, C. (2026). The balance of power in Ukraine and deterrence effectiveness against nuclear-armed Russia. *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies, 2*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.18485/fb_ijcss.2026.2.1.1.
10. Frantzman, S. J. (2019, September 26). *Are air defense systems ready to confront drone swarms?* Defense News. Retrieved from https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2019/09/26/are-air-defense-systems-ready-to-confront-drone-swarms/.
11. Gardner, F. (2019, September 20). *Saudi oil facility attacks: Race on to restore supplies*. BBC News. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49775849.
12. Gause, F. G., III. (2010). *The international relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge University Press.

13. General Authority for Military Industries. (2025). *GAMI reports localization of military spending in Saudi Arabia increases to 24.89%*. GAMI. Retrieved from https://www.gami.gov.sa/en/news/gami-reports-localization-military-spending-saudi-arabia-increases-2489.
14. George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.
15. Goh, E. (2007). Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing regional security strategies. *International Security, 32*(3), 113–157.
16. Gutiérrez de Terán Gómez-Benita, I. (2024). Oman and its traditional foreign policy: The economic costs of positive neutrality. *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos, 36*, 218–240. https://doi.org/10.15366/reim2024.36.009.
17. Hetteh, M. (2026). Revolutionary identity and nuclear bargaining: How symbolic legitimacy restructures utility in Iran's nuclear program. *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies, 2*(1), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.18485/fb_ijcss.2026.2.1.11.
18. International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2024). *The military balance 2024: The annual assessment of global military capabilities and defense economics*. Routledge.
19. Johnston, A. I. (1995). Thinking about strategic culture. *International Security, 19*(4), 32–64.
20. Kamrava, M. (2015). *Qatar: Small state, big politics*. Cornell University Press.
21. Lake, D. A. (2011). *Hierarchy in international relations*. Cornell University Press.
22. Legrenzi, M. (2015). *The GCC and the international relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, security and economic coordination in a changing Middle East*. I.B. Tauris. Retrieved from https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/gcc-and-the-international-relations-of-the-gulf-9781784532369/.
23. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar. (n.d.). *Mediation*. Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from https://mofa.gov.qa/en/foreign-policy/mediation/mediation.
24. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman. (2026, April 8). *Oman welcomes announcement of ceasefire between Iran and the United States*. Retrieved from https://www.fm.gov.om/en/41661/.
25. Mulyanyuma, A. A. (2026). United States–Republic of Korea joint nuclear defense guidelines: Evaluating alliance coordination against the North Korean threat. *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies, 2*(1), 43–50. https://doi.org/10.18485/fb_ijcss.2026.2.1.4.
26. Pavić, A. M., & Beriša, H. A. (2026). Multi-actor deterrence of small states: The case of the Republic of Serbia. *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies, 2*(1), 29–42. https://doi.org/10.18485/fb_ijcss.2026.2.1.3.
27. Public Investment Fund. (2017, May 18). *Key element of Vision 2030 realized with launch of new Saudi Arabian national defense company*. Public Investment Fund. Retrieved from https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/news-and-insights/press-releases/2017/key-element-of-vision-2030/.
28. Roberts, D. B. (2017). *Qatar: Securing the global ambitions of a city-state*. C. Hurst & Co. Retrieved from https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/qatar-securing-the-global-ambitions-of-a-city-state/.
29. Roberts, D. B. (2023). *Security politics in the Gulf monarchies: Continuity amid change*. Columbia University Press.
30. Saudi Vision 2030. (2016). *Vision 2030*. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Retrieved from https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en.
31. Şen, E. (2022). Oman's foreign policy and its mediating and balancing role in the Middle East. *Marmara University Journal of Political Science, 10*(1), 1–25.
32. Sharp, J. M. (2025). *Oman: Politics, security, and U.S. policy* (CRS Report No. RS21534). Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RS/PDF/RS21534/RS21534.122.pdf.
33. Shpakovskaya, M. A., & Gryzlov, G. V. (2025). Role of mediation in Qatar's foreign policy: A case of the Afghan conflict. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations, 25*(4), 721–732. https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2025-25-4-721-732.
34. Snyder, G. H. (1997). *Alliance politics*. Cornell University Press.
35. State of Qatar. (2003). *The Constitution of the State of Qatar* (Article 7, as amended). Retrieved from https://www.almeezan.qa/LawArticles.aspx?LawArticleID=25760&LawID=2284&language=en.

36. U.S. Department of Commerce. (2025). *United Arab Emirates—Defense*. U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/united-arab-emirates-defense.
37. Ulrichsen, K. C. (2016). *Gulf states in international political economy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
38. United Arab Emirates Embassy. (n.d.). *UAE and US defense systems cooperation*. Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. Retrieved from https://www.uae-embassy.org/uae-us-cooperation/uae-and-us-defense-systems-cooperation.
39. Vakil, S., & Quilliam, N. (2023, April 14). *Will reconciliation across the Middle East bring lasting change?* Chatham House. Retrieved from https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/will-reconciliation-across-middle-east-bring-lasting-change
40. Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.
41. Weitsman, P. A. (2013). *Waging war: Alliances, coalitions, and institutions of interstate violence*. Stanford University Press.
42. Wright, S. (2025). US foreign policy and the Gulf states: Changing dynamics in a multipolar world. *World Affairs, 188(4), Article e270032.* https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.70032.

Faculty of Security Studies
University of Belgrade