

Mitigating the risks of an unconstrained Iranian nuclear programme

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Cover

Iran conducts a drill in the Great Salt Desert. (Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Introduction

This report explores the options and tools available to the United Kingdom to mitigate the threats posed by an unconstrained Iranian nuclear programme in conjunction with its regional partners, especially the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹

The United States' and Israel's options for addressing Iran's nuclear programme have been analysed in depth elsewhere, and the IISS has a separate project to examine options regarding Iran's development of increasingly long-range, high-precision, nuclear-capable missiles. In contrast, the perspectives of the regional states and the opportunities and challenges presented by their policy preferences remain largely absent from the discussion. The report addresses this gap by focusing on the perceptions and policy preferences of the GCC states and the policy options available to the UK. IISS analysts investigated the differences between the regional partners' respective preferences through interviews and workshops with government officials and experts in defence, foreign policy, non-proliferation and international relations from across the six GCC states, and by examining recent developments in diplomacy, military acquisitions, the growth of economic ties and the implementation of sanctions. The report maps the collected threat perceptions and policy preferences of the GCC states and identifies policy tools and likely regional reactions, given the GCC states' emerging preferences and the regional security situation.

The following analysis is premised on the assumption that international efforts to reach a negotiated agreement to restore the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran to limit its nuclear programme will fail, and that subsequently Iran is likely to further reduce its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the verification of its safeguards obligations. The trajectory of Iran's nuclear programme, the current status of negotiations and the changes to the political context over the past year

suggest that these assumptions are warranted, albeit with a high degree of caution.

Since 2019, Iran has taken a number of steps that exceed the limits at the core of the 2015 JCPOA and violate its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and (still unratified) Additional Protocol with the IAEA. These steps began in response to the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 and have accelerated over the past year. Iran has also refused to resolve issues raised by the IAEA regarding its past covert nuclear activities, while attempting to subsume them within unrelated safeguards questions. These unresolved issues include the IAEA's discovery in 2019 of uranium particles at three previously undeclared facilities (Turquzabad, Varamin, and Marivan),² Iran's operation of a growing number of advanced centrifuges far outstripping the JCPOA limits,³ its stockpiling of ever-larger quantities of highly enriched uranium (HEU), and the subsequent discovery of particles of HEU with enrichment levels of up to 83.7% U₂₃₅.⁴ Iran's failure to answer its questions led the IAEA to conclude that it 'is not in a position to provide assurance that Iran's nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful'.⁵ Iran's actions have also significantly shortened the time it would take it to build a nuclear device if it took the decision to do so.

In this context, Iran's formal withdrawal from its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is not unthinkable. Significantly, in 2020, it threatened to withdraw from the NPT if its file were referred to the UN Security Council.⁶ Iran therefore appears to be edging closer to a nuclear breakout capability in parallel with its departure from its international obligations on limiting its nuclear programme, all of which raises the risk of conflict and regional instability, including the possibility that Israel – with possible support from the US – may decide to intervene militarily to delay Iran's progress.

This report assumes that it is not yet inevitable that Iran will begin manufacturing, testing and deploying

nuclear warheads; it posits instead that it would be desirable for Iran and the West to find a stability point short of full weaponisation as part of a strategy of nuclear 'latency' or 'hedging', if the correct inducements can be put in place. The report therefore posits the steps

that the UK can take, in coordination with like-minded states in the GCC, to forestall Iran's development of nuclear weapons, using a mixture of military and non-military instruments of power as part of a strategy combining deterrence, containment and engagement.

Background: Iran's nuclear programme

The current state of Iran's nuclear programme

According to the IAEA director general's 28 February 2023 report, Iran now possesses 437.4 kilograms of 20% HEU and 87.5 kgs of 60% HEU, alongside the aforementioned particles of HEU enriched to 87.3%.⁷ It continues to produce greater quantities of HEU by using its massive stockpile of 1,324.5 kg of 5% U-235 and 1,555.3 kg of 2% U-235, as well as by enriching its tailings and stocks of natural uranium. In addition to accumulating HEU at ever-higher levels of enrichment, it continues to install additional cascades of highly advanced centrifuges at its enrichment plants, for example making recent changes to the configuration of its advanced centrifuges at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant without giving prior notification to the IAEA. On 21 February 2021, Iran also interrupted the IAEA's ability to monitor its centrifuge manufacturing, further eroding the IAEA's ability to re-baseline its knowledge of the status of Iran's nuclear programme in relation to the JCPOA and its safeguards commitments.⁸ Iran's past actions, including its recent experiments in the metallurgy of 60% HEU – combined with its prior weaponisation activities, as verified by IAEA inspectors – clearly demonstrate to the international community a policy of advancing towards nuclear latency.

The Joint Commission of the JCPOA has been working to resurrect the Iran deal since President Joe Biden arrived in the White House in 2021. Donald Trump not only withdrew the US from the deal during his presidency but instituted a 'maximum pressure' campaign that imposed additional sanctions on Iran, in addition to removing previous waivers granted under the JCPOA. These actions have increased Iran's leverage in the negotiations and, in Tehran's eyes, given it the moral high ground. They also incentivised Tehran to demand additional commitments from the US if Iran returns to implementation – particularly regarding sanctions relief and Washington's designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. Nevertheless, the advances in its

nuclear programme beyond the JCPOA's limits and the break in continuity of IAEA monitoring, along with the approaching sunset clauses within the agreement itself and the shifting regional and global political context, make necessary a more comprehensive re-evaluation of whether it is possible and desirable to re-enter the deal.

Iran's crackdown on protestors, starting in November 2022, and the detection of its provision of armed uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) and (allegedly) guided missiles to Russia in its war on Ukraine, from August 2022,⁹ have further complicated US and European efforts to engage with the Iranian regime. These developments have elicited further sanctions on Iran from the US and the European Union. Thus, Iran's actions unrelated to its nuclear programme, and the resultant sanctions, have complicated its desire for broad sanctions relief, as these actions have eliminated the United States' and the EU's willingness and ability to take any actions that may lead to broader sanctions relief.

The place of Iran's nuclear programme in its broader strategic calculus

While maintaining ambiguity over its ultimate goal, Tehran has demonstrated that it will not negotiate an end to its nuclear programme under any circumstances, and will probably either proceed deliberately towards acquiring nuclear weapons or stumble inadvertently into doing so. Instead of seeking to remain within its international obligations, Iran has pursued an incremental approach towards weaponisation through a series of *faits accomplis* while occasionally participating in negotiations aimed at designing time-limited restrictions when obliged to do so by international pressure. Iran's actions over the past decade, including its engagement in the JCPOA process prior to US withdrawal, would seem to indicate that a decision to build nuclear weapons had not been taken. Its recent actions also seem to be predicated on increasing its political leverage in order to relieve sanctions, rather than being indicative of a crash nuclear programme. This suggests

evolving rationales have been at play among Iranian decision-makers, due to internal drivers as well as external actions.

Iran's nuclear programme has become central to its strategic thinking and global diplomacy. In the minds of Iranian decision-makers, regardless of the direct and indirect costs of the programme, it is an assertion of the country's status, independence and steadfastness, while keeping regional and global rivals on edge. It assuages the regime's concerns about national weakness, emanating from the isolation the country experienced during and after the Iran–Iraq War, and complements other aspects of Iranian power, notably its arsenals of missiles and armed UAVs and its networks of regional partners. It remains unclear how much importance Iran gave to regional threat perceptions in designing its nuclear programme, separately from considerations of self-sufficiency and deterrence vis-à-vis the US, which the regime identifies as its ultimate enemy. Also, it can be safely assumed that Iran did not overlook the proximity of nuclear-weapons states such as India, Pakistan and Israel, the ambivalent nuclear posture of ambitious countries such as Egypt, Turkiye and Saudi Arabia, and the memory of Iraq's nuclear programme under Saddam Hussein. Iran's March 2023 diplomatic breakthrough with Saudi Arabia is one indicator, alongside a number of other outreach activities, of its sophisticated approach

to diplomacy and deterrence as part of its longer-term strategy in the region.

Diplomatically, Iran's nuclear programme has served to raise the country's global profile. While it led to the imposition of isolation and sanctions by Western countries, it also attracted attention and has given the regime a sense of enhanced status. Perversely, the high-level diplomacy required to reach and sustain the 2015 nuclear agreement, and since 2018 to keep it alive, are seen from Tehran as a testament to the country's importance.

The diplomatic process itself has generated geopolitical returns. From Iran's perspective, it has fostered closer interaction, trade and military exchanges with Russia and China, and split some European countries away from the US in pursuing sanctions relief, thus exacerbating Washington's isolation and declining influence across the region. Importantly, the nuclear programme had also turned international attention away from Iran's missile and armed-UAV programmes and regional activities, at least prior to its sale of those weapons to Russia for use against Ukraine. With limited bandwidth and time, global powers prioritised the nuclear programme instead of focusing on the regime's malign activities domestically and abroad, seeing it as a global-security threat with the potential to lead to inter-state war. The West's nuclear diplomacy with Iran has indeed survived the significant domestic, regional and extra-regional crises in which the regime was deeply involved.

The GCC states and Iran's nuclear programme: perceptions and policy preferences

To ascertain the GCC states' views on Iran's nuclear programme and how best to respond to it, the IISS conducted a wide range of conversations across the Gulf. These included two roundtable discussions involving serving and retired government officials and analysts from the six GCC states in late 2022 and early 2023. The roundtables were supplemented by in-person interviews conducted with serving government officials. All the conversations were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis. The following section summarises the IISS's main findings. It highlights areas of agreement and disagreement between representatives of the six states, along with instances of continuity with and departure from stated policy positions on the topic.

There were ten principal findings:

1. A common baseline perception of Iran as a source of threat and instability
2. A common critical perception of the JCPOA process as too narrow to address regional security concerns
3. Narrowing but still significant differences between the GCC states in their preferred responses to the Iranian threat
4. A lack of a unified regional security posture to deter a potential nuclear-armed Iran
5. A high level of consensus that the Gulf-US strategic partnership remains a core component of regional deterrence vis-à-vis Iran
6. Disagreement on the utility of a security partnership between the individual GCC states and Israel
7. Acknowledgment that Russia's war on Ukraine has emboldened Iran
8. Across-the-board agreement that Gulf engagement with Iran is needed
9. Disagreement on whether Iranian nuclear weapons are inevitable, but unanimity that the IRGC's influence will continue to grow
10. Broad consensus that engagement with Russia and China will continue in the absence of more robust US engagement

Finding 1: A common baseline perception of Iran as a source of threat and instability

The formation of the GCC in May 1981 was a collective response to the perceived threat from Iran and Iraq. Despite sharing a baseline perception of Iran's regional activity as destabilising, however, the GCC states vary in the extent to which they believe Iran poses a threat to their security. Participants' assessments of the Iranian threat reflect the history of their respective countries' relationships with Iran and their internal security challenges. That all six GCC states view Iran's behaviour as threatening is supported by the fact that they collectively expressed their shared concerns even at the height of the Gulf rift that began in 2017. In July 2020 the GCC's then-secretary general Nayef al-Hajraf condemned Iran's provision of missiles and UAVs to the Houthis as a violation of the international arms embargo on Yemen imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 2216, describing Iran's actions as posing 'a threat to the security and stability of the region'. In August 2020 the six states addressed a letter to the UN Security Council calling for an extension of the international arms embargo on Iran. The embargo had blocked Tehran's access to conventional weapons but was lifted in October 2020 as part of the 2015 JCPOA.

Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia view Iran as posing a hybrid threat by cultivating sleeper cells or instigating terrorist or insurgent activity by sympathetic factions among their Shia populations. For decades Saudi Arabia has been organising 'national dialogue' as a means of defusing sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites, thereby undercutting Iran's attempts to radicalise segments of the Saudi population.¹⁰ Participants agree that achieving national unity and managing internal political differences are among the most important measures the GCC states can take to minimise Iran's ability to project political or ideological influence within their borders.

Since the conflict in Yemen began in 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also been exposed to missile

and UAV attacks from Iran itself and from Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Yemen, most notably the Houthis. Iran, moreover, occupies three disputed islands which the UAE claims as its own, and while Iran's claims on Bahrain were formally put to rest in 1971, advisers to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have occasionally revived those claims as a means of exerting diplomatic pressure on the GCC. As a result, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE view Iran as being motivated by hegemonic ambitions in the region, which they believe are underpinned by its self-image as an imperial power and a revolutionary ideology that seeks to export Iran's Islamic revolution.

Although Oman and Qatar see Iran's activities in the region as destabilising, they are less likely to regard Iran as posing a direct threat to their national security. Oman and Qatar view Iran's nuclear programme and regional behaviour as at least partly motivated by legitimate security concerns, especially those related to the US and Israel.¹¹ Nevertheless, both countries regard Iran's support for non-state armed groups in the region, the proliferation of its UAVs and missiles, and its attacks on critical infrastructure and commercial shipping as posing a threat to their own economic and security interests.

Finding 2: A common critical perception of the JCPOA process as too narrow in scope to address regional security concerns

Participants agree that the single-minded focus on Iran's nuclear programme through the JCPOA has been detrimental to confronting other aspects of Iran's behaviour. In line with the GCC states' criticisms of the JCPOA, there is widespread agreement that Iran's support for non-state armed groups and the proliferation of its UAVs and missiles must be addressed alongside its nuclear programme, rather than at a later date or conditionally upon agreement and compliance with a nuclear deal. For instance, in Bahrain, Iran's nuclear programme ranks below the threat of Iranian interference in the country's internal affairs and from its development of longer-range precision missiles.

Indeed, for most participants, Iran's use and proliferation of missiles and UAVs rank as more dangerous than the nuclear programme, with some of them adding that it is Iran's malign behaviour in the region that

drives concerns about its nuclear programme – not the other way around, as it is for the West. Additionally, the Vienna JCPOA talks' focus on Iran's nuclear programme is seen as having the unintended consequence of enabling Iran's pursuit of its regional agenda and its missile and UAV programmes, which was deprioritised by comparison. There is a fear among participants that Iran will in any case still manage to attain full nuclear capabilities, or in other words that the breakdown of the Vienna JCPOA talks implies a double failure: firstly to prevent Iran from edging closer to a nuclear-weapons capability; and secondly to confront other aspects of Iran's behaviour, due to the international preoccupation with its nuclear programme and, to a lesser extent, with its longer-range missile programme.

There is agreement across the GCC states that they need to simultaneously 'deter, contain and engage' Iran, while avoiding military escalation. A shared concern is that Iran would target the GCC states in the event of conflict even if they played no direct part in it, with disastrous security and economic consequences for them. The 2019 attack on Saudi Aramco's facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais showed the GCC states the level of threat Iran could pose, and also, in light of the Trump administration's subsequent restraint, how limited the US response could be – not to mention the indifference of the rest of the world. This lack of US and global response has impelled greater integration and cooperation within the GCC.

Finding 3: Narrowing but still significant differences between the GCC states in their preferred responses to the Iranian threat

The differences between the GCC states' respective strategies on Iran are smaller today than they were in the past, and those differences are not necessarily seen by participants in our study as preventing further coordination and cooperation. If coordinated properly, different approaches, based on varied threat perceptions, can still serve to restrain Iran and communicate more clearly with Tehran. For example, Kuwait and the UAE coordinated with Saudi Arabia regarding the decision to send ambassadors to Iran in August 2022,¹² followed by Saudi Arabia itself in March 2023 – a notable example of cooperation in order to achieve regional de-escalation. Oman, whose relations with Iran have consistently been

the best among the GCC states, has helped sponsor dialogue between Tehran and other Gulf states. It is normal for differences to exist, with each country having a sovereign right to its own security calculus.

Finding 4: A lack of a unified regional security posture to deter a potential nuclear-armed Iran

To deter Iran, GCC states have at their disposal a range of military and non-military options. Based on our research, there is a broadly shared view among the GCC states that in the absence of a formal US security guarantee, Saudi Arabia would find it necessary to pursue a nuclear-weapons programme of its own to restore deterrence vis-à-vis a nuclear-armed Iran. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's pledge in March 2018 that Saudi Arabia would develop nuclear weapons if Iran did is seen as evidence that Iran could trigger nuclear proliferation in the region if it were to cross the nuclear threshold. The remarks on 11 January 2023 by the Saudi energy minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, that the country planned to utilise its uranium resources to produce 'yellowcake' and 'low-enriched uranium', and for 'manufacturing nuclear fuel', have been interpreted by some as a practical step towards a Saudi nuclear programme should Iran weaponise.¹³

In contrast, as the only GCC state with a nuclear-energy programme, we assess that the UAE could position itself as the only responsible nuclear actor in the Middle East. Having waived the right to enrichment, it could pursue an active policy of peaceful nuclear diplomacy. If the UAE did so, this would have the effect of further highlighting Iranian non-compliance and would represent another example of Gulf states' attempts to assert their own individual approaches on the nuclear issue.

Finding 5: A high level of consensus that the Gulf-US strategic partnership remains a core component of regional deterrence vis-à-vis Iran

There is widespread agreement among participants that the GCC states' strategic partnership with the US remains a vital part of regional deterrence with regard to Iran, and that coalitions involving different configurations of GCC states and their Western partners – primarily the US, the UK and NATO – could play an

important role in this. Participants are split, however, over the merits of a formal security guarantee with the US, with some highly sceptical that Washington would be willing to make such a commitment.

There is also considerable scepticism about the ability of US or Israeli military strikes to inflict a long-term debilitating impact on Iran's nuclear programme. Participants take the view that the fallout from a likely Iranian counter-escalation, which in their view would probably target US assets in the GCC states and elsewhere in the Middle East, would outweigh the strategic benefits of such strikes. They suggest, moreover, that the strikes would end up strengthening the Iranian regime's narrative of a Western conspiracy against it and accelerate its efforts to build nuclear weapons. There is a consensus that Iran is extremely unlikely to give up its nuclear programme, having drawn lessons from the fate of former Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi who gave up Libya's nuclear programme in 2003 and was deposed and killed by rebels with Western military backing in 2011.

Quite apart from the question of how effective the military option would be, there are significant doubts about the United States' willingness to intervene militarily. In Gulf capitals there is dissatisfaction with the West's perceived tolerance of Iranian nuclear hedging: given Western statements that Iran would never be allowed to become a nuclear threshold state, but that in the view of the GCC states it already is one, their perception is one of Western failure. If Western states cannot prevent Iran from becoming a threshold state, then their ability to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is seen as even more questionable. Whether the West really has a red line with regard to Iran's nuclear programme remains uncertain in Gulf minds. And because of US policy volatility on the issue, the GCC states therefore believe they need to build up their national capabilities and become more self-reliant when it comes to deterrence. However, views among regional experts on deterrence vary: some argue that deterrence should be a national endeavour first, with GCC-wide cooperation acting as a force multiplier. In this view the GCC cannot be a substitute for national strength, and the same logic extends to international partnerships.

The utility of US military posturing vis-à-vis Iran and that of greater defence cooperation between the GCC states and Israel in shaping Iran's behaviour are also matters of regional debate. The deterrence value of US military posturing (exemplified most recently by the US–Israel exercise *Juniper Oak 2023*, which appeared to simulate a large-scale attack on Iran) is valued by some of the regional experts we spoke to, although the more sceptical voices argue that 'ambiguous provocations' raise the risk of conflict in the region.

Finding 6: Disagreement on the utility of a security partnership between the individual GCC states and Israel

Israel is often viewed by the GCC states as a potentially unpredictable and destabilising actor, likely to determine its course of action independently from its regional partners. For those GCC countries that have recently established relations with Israel, these new ties are therefore not meant to deter Iran, as they are not meant to be seen as reflecting a convergence of views with Israel on the need for action against Iran. In fact, the inclusion of Israel in a coalition composed of GCC and Western states for the purpose of deterring Iran would be seen by the GCC states as too provocative. Only a few participants in our study believe that Israel would be likely to consult with its regional partners before undertaking unilateral military action against Iran.

Views about partnerships with the West also differ among the GCC states and fluctuate over time. For some participants the GCC states are wrong to focus excessively on the US while neglecting other partnerships that exist in varying degrees of formalisation and substance, notably those with the UK, NATO and the EU. Others consider that the GCC states should reframe the US–GCC partnership on an equal (or more equal) basis, rather than one that can be easily terminated when energy interests end. There is a general view that Western states should not sideline the GCC while engaging with Iran, only to find themselves needing GCC assistance when US–Iran bilateral relations fall apart. The consensus therefore is that there should be a more coordinated and region-led approach to addressing the broad set of threats posed by Iran.

Finding 7: Acknowledgement that Russia's war on Ukraine has emboldened Iran

The GCC states acknowledge that Russia's war on Ukraine has had a negative impact on Iran's willingness to negotiate its nuclear programme and that Russia has emboldened Iran, particularly in supporting its hardened stance in the JCPOA talks. They agree, however, that maintaining ties with Russia has strategic utility, not least due to its position within OPEC and its essential role in keeping energy prices high. The war has had a deleterious impact on Gulf regional security, with the GCC states wishing to see a negotiated settlement of the conflict at the earliest opportunity. Russia's invasion is seen as the culmination of its previous incursions into Georgia, Crimea and Syria, which had gone largely unanswered by the West. The intervention in Syria convinced the GCC states of the need to maintain dialogue with Tehran, partly as a means of incentivising Russia to maintain distance from Iran.

Participants believe that an isolated Russia is likely to deepen its cooperation with Iran. Since the war began, Iran has increased military cooperation with Russia and has been less willing to engage constructively in nuclear talks. Western sanctions risk prompting China, Russia and Iran to build a 'parallel economy' to cater for sanctioned states. Although the GCC states are incapable of convincing Russia to abandon its partnership with Iran, they see value in using diplomatic channels to convey their concerns to Moscow – notably about Russia's potential transfer of Su-35 aircraft and air-defence systems to Iran. This is why Western pressure on the GCC states to scale back their relations with Russia is wrong-headed. Their engagement with Russia is essential to limit Iran's access to Russian technology.

Finding 8: Across-the-board agreement that Gulf engagement with Iran is needed

Based on the conversations we conducted, the GCC states diverge on the strategic utility of conveying clear red lines to Iran in an attempt to prevent it from edging closer to a nuclear-weapons capability, but there is across-the-board agreement that engagement with Iran is needed. Whether to set those red lines (and if so, how) is a matter of policy debate among the GCC states. Given Iran's track record, there is concern that

doing so would tempt Tehran to engage in provocations approaching the threshold, and thereby risk inadvertent escalation or conflict through misjudgement.

In addition to building their deterrence capabilities and working with partners to contain Iran, there is general agreement among the GCC states that they need to engage with Iran simultaneously. Three tracks are envisaged: bilateral, through the GCC, and in coordination with international efforts to address Iran's nuclear programme. This last track is critical, as the outcomes of those talks are likely to affect Gulf regional security. In addition, any approach involving 'carrots and sticks' in nuclear diplomacy with Iran will probably require buy-in and participation from the GCC states.

However, participants cast doubt over the GCC states' ability to play an impactful role in nuclear diplomacy with Iran. The GCC states need to be realistic about their limited influence on Iran's nuclear decision-making, as evidenced by their exclusion from the JCPOA talks, and their lack of expertise in the nuclear domain is also an obstacle to their participation in such talks. Instead, participants agree that Iran's nuclear programme should be dealt with as an international problem.

Deciding how to engage with Iran includes the question of who to engage with. The utility of engaging directly with the IRGC, the branch of the Iranian armed forces responsible for supporting non-state armed groups and proliferating UAVs and missiles, is particularly contentious. Although there is wide agreement among experts that the IRGC plays a key role in deciding Iran's policy towards the GCC states, they are divided as to whether the GCC states should seek to engage with it directly. Until now the GCC has engaged only with the Iranian government; reaching out to the IRGC would be controversial and risky. A desire for direct contact with the IRGC is understandable due to its growing power within the Iranian system, but this is unlikely to bring about change in Iran's regional behaviour and could come at the cost of legitimising the IRGC's role. There is agreement among experts on the need for GCC and Western states to make a consistent effort to condemn the IRGC for its destabilising support for non-state armed groups.

The utility of using economic inducements such as sanctions relief, trade or investments as incentives for Iran to change its behaviour is also a matter for debate.

Since coercion is unlikely to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear or missile programmes, economic inducements could be more effective at moderating its behaviour. Supporting this view is the fact that economic engagement through trade is one of the ways the UAE has engaged with Iran: it served to incentivise Iran to de-escalate bilateral tensions and accommodate Emirati interests, given its need to sustain this crucial trade. However, as the IRGC would probably be a major beneficiary of sanctions relief or investments, these would have to be conditional upon changes in Iran's behaviour or be designed to help the Iranian people directly and bypass the government and the IRGC.

Finding 9: Disagreement on whether Iranian nuclear weapons are inevitable, but unanimity that the IRGC's influence will continue to grow

While not all participants believe that a nuclear-armed Iran is inevitable, the majority view remains that it is likely to acquire nuclear weapons at some point in the future. As such, participants agree that diplomacy with Tehran should instead focus on limiting Iran's missile programme or other malign actions. Iran may be willing to discuss issues related to stability, especially considering the pace of proliferation of military capabilities to the GCC countries intended to offset or deter Iran's capabilities and activities across the region.¹⁴ In any case, were Iran to become a nuclear-weapons state, the GCC states are of the firm belief that it would probably pursue its destabilising strategy of supporting non-state armed groups and proliferating missiles and UAVs with even greater vigour and impunity – two issues the GCC states believe to be an existential threat.

The trajectory of Iran's political system is also of great concern to the Gulf states. Regime collapse or democratic change is seen as less likely than a shift in the balance of power between regime factions – especially the IRGC and the clerics. The event most capable of triggering change in Iranian policy would be the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the subsequent diminution of the prestige and moral authority of the clerical class in Iran. Trends towards secularisation are already under way, as shown by the large-scale unrest of the past year across Iran, and the militarisation of the Iranian state looks to continue apace. As the

country's political system becomes less theocratic and more militaristic, the IRGC, as the obvious public-facing standard-bearer for Iran's military power, is likely to play an even greater role in the future.

Finding 10: Broad consensus that engagement with Russia and China will continue in the absence of more robust US engagement

The perception of a shift in global dynamics and an end to US unipolarity is leading the Gulf states to recalibrate their political and military alignments. The GCC states will therefore work together with China and Russia whenever they perceive that their interests align, and continue to seek military and economic benefits from those relationships. Although their relationship with the US has many dimensions, it is founded upon Gulf security tied to economic stability. The perception of

a weakened US security commitment has motivated them to diversify their economic and security partnerships. The GCC–China and GCC–Russia relationships are transactional but effective. In the past, these relationships – particularly the one with China – were seen by outside experts as primarily economic – but they have quickly taken on a significant political-diplomatic dimension. China's brokering of the diplomatic normalisation in Saudi–Iranian relations in March 2023 is just one example of this. China also has long-standing cooperation with Saudi Arabia on missile development and, alongside Russia, is seeking to use military cooperation unbound by ethical concerns to reduce US and Western influence in the region. Having understood the significance Iran places on its relations with China and Russia, the Gulf states are now trying to utilise these links to their benefit, regardless of Washington's preferences.

Analysis of the GCC states' policies and positions on Iran's nuclear programme

Is the risk of GCC nuclear proliferation serious?

The question of nuclear proliferation in the GCC states in response to Iran's nuclear programme merits further discussion. Firstly, the GCC states have taken almost no practical steps towards creating civil nuclear programmes that could serve as a basis for a weapons programme. Having signed a 123 Agreement with the US, the UAE has given up its right to domestic enrichment, while Saudi Arabia's civil nuclear programme remains in its infancy. Secondly, since the regional analysts and officials that the IISS engaged with for this study do not believe the GCC states would be targets of a hypothetical Iranian nuclear weapon, it is unclear what the GCC states' hypothetical pursuit of nuclear weapons would be meant to deter. Thirdly, the strategic, political, legal, and technical barriers to the pursuit of nuclear weapons are significant. Given the strong international response that any hypothetical violations of the international non-proliferation regime by the GCC states would probably elicit, the GCC states would have to factor in the cost of potential economic sanctions and damaged relations with Western partners.

An alternative explanation is that by underscoring the risk of a nuclear proliferation cascade in the region if Iran were to weaponise, the GCC states are seeking to incentivise the US to formalise its security commitment to the region to prevent further proliferation. The risk is that by making such public declarations, the GCC states may be backing themselves into a corner should Iran cross the nuclear threshold, becoming obliged to follow through with their threats in order to avoid a major loss of credibility.

What explains the convergence of GCC views on Iran?

Whereas the GCC states have traditionally held varying views on the extent to which Iran posed a threat to their core interests, Iran's aggressive posture has brought their perceptions into closer alignment. The Iranian attacks on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019, and the ongoing attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea, have been an important catalyst for a hardening of regional threat perceptions. Moreover, the intensifying ideological battles at the heart of Iran's political system, its refusal to take a constructive approach to the international talks on its nuclear programme, and its delivery to Russia of UAVs and missiles for use in Ukraine have narrowed the gap in perceptions between the GCC states and the West. Although today there is near consensus on the need to address Iranian behaviour comprehensively without singling out its nuclear programme, the GCC states and their Western partners still lack a shared strategy on how best to address the threats Iran poses. While the GCC states remain highly averse to the use of military force to prevent Iran from possessing even a single nuclear weapon, they have not articulated an alternative strategy to dissuade Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. Having not been included in the international talks on Iran's nuclear programme, the GCC states do not consider themselves responsible for their failure and take the view that it is up to the international community to devise a new strategy. At the same time, they have taken it upon themselves to pursue de-escalation and have made a concerted effort to maintain dialogue with Iran.

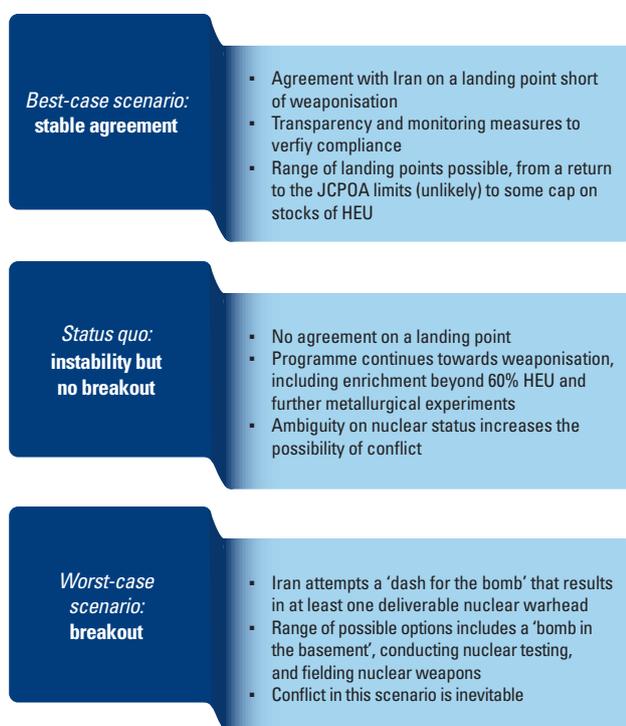
Mitigating risks: policy tools and regional responses

In its current unconstrained form, the Iranian nuclear programme poses multiple risks for regional security and the international non-proliferation regime. As Iran continues to make advances in its nuclear programme, the ambiguity of US and Israeli red lines and Iran's desire to test and push those limits significantly raise the risk of conflict between Israel, the US and Iran. If Iran were to build nuclear weapons, moreover, the chances that other regional powers, notably Turkiye and Saudi Arabia, would follow suit would increase dramatically, imperilling the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Also, armed with nuclear weapons, Iran would probably act with greater impunity by scaling up its support for non-state armed groups and proliferating arms and weapons systems including missiles, UAVs and loitering munitions.

To mitigate those risks, Western and GCC states therefore have a common interest in pushing Iran into finding a stable hedging point for Iran's nuclear programme in a state of latency, short of weaponisation. This would require convincing Iran to shift its nuclear programme from its current unconstrained state to one in which Iran agrees to place limits on its nuclear programme – and accepts the transparency and verification measures needed to verify its compliance with those limits – in return for a creative form of indirect sanctions relief. While Tehran may not yet have decided to build and field nuclear weapons, it is highly unlikely that it will roll back its nuclear programme. Iran could therefore potentially be persuaded to maintain its nuclear capabilities at a level between where it stands now – with at least two warheads' worth of 60% enriched uranium,¹⁵ alongside hints that it may be experimenting on metallurgy with HEU to prepare a nuclear-weapons pit¹⁶ – and then halt at the point before it begins to manufacture and deploy nuclear weapons. A better deal, including restraints on Iran's nuclear and missile programmes and constraining its malign regional activities, is unlikely as there is no agreement among the US, the UK, France, China and Russia to work in concert, nor are there incentives for Iran to come to the table. Although not all parties may regard some form of Iranian voluntary limits as optimal, they nevertheless have the advantage of moderating the risk of conflict and avoiding Iranian breakout.

The transparency necessary to verify any such diplomatic effort could be implemented under unilateral, bilateral, minilateral or multilateral (i.e., IAEA) auspices. Depending on the hedging point, compliance monitoring could be implemented under the auspices of Iran's IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. This would require significant roll-back on Iran's activities in order to return to compliance with the IAEA's safeguards. It would also restrict the transparency and verification measures necessary to assure compliance

Figure 1: **Three scenarios for Iran's nuclear programme**



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Source: IISS

because Iran’s Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement does not allow for inspections at undeclared facilities. However, Iran could instead agree to additional transparency, as it did in the JCPOA, or use the Additional Protocol, which it has signed but not ratified, and thus include some combination of on-site safeguards inspections and remote monitoring, or verification measures offered by Iran to the IAEA. If Iran chooses to go beyond metallurgical work with HEU towards building a viable HEU warhead pit, IAEA inspections may no longer be possible due to the potential for revealing nuclear-weapons design information to IAEA inspectors, and therefore compliance with any proffered hedging point would only be verifiable by an existing nuclear-weapons state (the US, the UK, France, Russia or China). Iran also may decide against any transparency and instead make a unilateral declaration of its hedging point – i.e., where it will stop in its weaponisation – with no on-site or remote access. This choice would be likely to lead to instability or military intervention, as outside states would have no incentive to believe anything Iran says without verifiability.

Whether acting in concert or separately, Western and regional actors are currently deploying multiple tools – ranging from diplomatic engagement and economic measures to the threat of military strikes – in an attempt

to convince Iran to agree on a stable and transparent equilibrium for its nuclear programme, and to deter it from breaking out. Western and GCC states differ in their ranking of the various threats Iran poses and in their risk appetite for and vulnerability to military conflict, and therefore also in their favoured policy mixes. Given their geographical proximity to Iran and higher vulnerability to Iranian threats, the GCC states unsurprisingly have their own distinct priorities and interests vis-à-vis Iran. Based on the views of the Gulf officials and analysts we spoke to, as presented in the previous section, Table 1 summarises the main policy tools available to Western states to convince Iran to reach a mutually agreeable landing point for its nuclear programme, and the extent to which they correspond with the GCC states’ own preferences.

Deterrence

The US, the UK and other Western partners have employed various policy tools to deter Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The US has leveraged its regional partnerships and military presence to apply coercive pressure. The US and Israel have threatened to use all means necessary, though without identifying clearly what the trigger for military intervention would be, preferring instead to maintain a degree of strategic

Table 1: Western policy tools to dissuade Iran from weaponisation, and likely GCC responses

Approach	Western policy tools	Expected GCC responses
Deterrence: raising the political cost of weaponisation for Iran so prohibitively as to dissuade it from weaponising.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Enhance Western defence posture and reiterate threat of military strikes. ■ Provide additional military capabilities to regional partners, notably GCC states (e.g., short-range missiles, 5th-generation fighter aircraft, armed UAVs, etc.). ■ Encourage US partners to formalise defence and security ties and to integrate military capabilities. ■ Formalise US security commitment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ GCC states may welcome a more robust Western military presence in the Gulf region, as long as it is not explicitly framed as being aimed at Iran. ■ Risk appetites among GCC states vary, but they agree on the need to avoid military conflict with Iran. ■ GCC states would welcome a transfer of increased military capabilities that serves a deterrence purpose. ■ GCC states would prefer formal US commitment but believe it to be unlikely.
Containment: degrading Iran’s economy and scaling back its access to dual-use technology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Impose additional Western sanctions on Iran. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ GCC states are likely to support continued sanctions on Iran if they serve to constrain its military power, but will remain sceptical of the effectiveness of economic sanctions in changing Iran’s calculus on its nuclear programme. ■ They will remain unlikely to support kinetic action against Iranian economic interests due to fear of Iranian reprisals.
Engagement: maintaining diplomatic talks with Iran and offering economic and diplomatic inducements to incentivise desirable change in Iran’s behaviour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Diplomatic talks in bilateral, unilateral or multilateral formats. ■ Promise sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable commitments, or design sanctions to help the Iranian people directly, bypassing the government and the IRGC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ GCC states are supportive of diplomatic talks in principle. ■ They will maintain their own bilateral dialogues with Iran. ■ They remain wary of taking advantage of any sanctions relief due to the likelihood of US action against them. ■ They will remain concerned that Western engagement could lead to a deprioritisation of non-nuclear issues.

Source: IISS

ambiguity.¹⁷ The US has a considerable military presence in the Gulf region, deploying a large air-force contingent, the Fifth Fleet and about 36,500 troops.¹⁸ The UK and France have a smaller military presence, in Bahrain and Abu Dhabi respectively. The US has also made important changes to its maritime-security architecture in the region, including setting up Coalition Task Force (CTF) Sentinel in November 2019 to deter Iranian threats to merchant shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait; creating a new naval task force, Task Force 59, under the command of the Fifth Fleet in 2021, focused on deploying unmanned service vessels (USVs) to monitor maritime activity; and establishing CTF 153 under the Combined Maritime Forces in 2022 to expand international maritime-security efforts in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden.¹⁹

Under the Trump administration the US attempted to formalise defence and security cooperation among the GCC states, Egypt and Jordan under a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), but the initiative ultimately failed.²⁰ Given the region's instability, formalising such an alliance would entail a significant entanglement risk, a prospect that dampened regional appetites for the initiative. More recently, the US has resumed its efforts to encourage regional partners to integrate their air-defence and early-warning systems to better mitigate the threat of airborne attacks from Iran and its regional non-state partners.²¹ To date, however, the GCC states have refrained from pooling their air-defence assets, preferring to integrate their air defences bilaterally with the US. It may not be possible to prevent all hybrid war, but the broader the coalition of regional states that can be convinced to cooperate on deterrence and containment, the higher the price Iran may pay for any aggressive acts.

Building on the momentum of the 2019 Abraham Accords, the US has also brought Israel into CENTCOM and led joint naval exercises involving Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in the Red Sea in November 2021.²² Although the UAE and Bahrain have denied that their relations with Israel are aimed at Iran, they have nevertheless advanced their defence and security cooperation with Israel, including the UAE's unconfirmed purchase and deployment of Israeli *Barak-8* missile-defence systems and Bahrain's purchase of coastal radar systems to

defend against airborne threats.²³ Through cooperative platforms such as I2U2 and the Negev Forum, the US has pushed for Israel's integration into minilateral security and economic frameworks in the region.²⁴ However, Israel's normalisation process in the region has lost momentum over the past two years. Saudi Arabia has revived interest in the Arab Peace Initiative and explicitly identified the creation of a Palestinian state as a precondition of recognising Israel.²⁵ Given the current composition of its ruling coalition, Israel is unlikely to take steps towards Palestinian statehood, making the prospect of closer alignment with GCC states other than the UAE and Bahrain less likely.

The GCC states remain highly averse to the use of force against Iran. Given their doubts over the long-term reliability of the US as a defence partner, they are opposed to military escalation with Iran that could have ruinous consequences for their economies and critical infrastructure. Iran would be likely to launch missile and UAV attacks against the GCC states in retaliation against US or Israeli strikes on its nuclear facilities. Since the GCC states do not believe they are the main targets of Iran's nuclear programme, they take the view that the strategic benefit of setting back the programme through military action would be outweighed by the security and economic consequences of conflict. Nevertheless, the GCC states would be unable to constrain US or Israeli military action against Iran. In principle they would have a say on whether US forces would launch attacks on Iran from their territories in the event of conflict. They would prefer any military action against Iran to be concluded as quickly as possible so as to minimise Iranian retaliation against GCC targets, which they would expect to take place irrespective of whether they supported the attacks.

The GCC states prefer to maintain a balance of power with Iran by forging external partnerships, principally with the US, but also by procuring arms and weapons systems from all sources available. Washington's defence partnership with the GCC states entails no formal requirement for mutual defence. Since the Iranian and Houthi missile and UAV attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019 and Abu Dhabi in 2022, the GCC states – particularly the UAE – have urged the US to formalise its commitment to their

security along the lines of a NATO-like defence pact.²⁶ However, this idea seems to be premature and based on a poor understanding of the dynamics that created NATO in the first place. The NATO allies faced the possibility of imminent invasion by a foe, the Soviet Union, seen as undeterrable without forming the alliance and then facilitating the eventual presence of millions of troops and thousands of nuclear weapons. At this stage, a more modest realignment of the GCC states on the political and military front, combined with limited security guarantees from the US and potentially the UK and France, is a more viable option. This is not to say that a formal defence agreement is out of the question, but it is an unrealistic goal in the short to medium term.

In addition to pushing the US to formalise its security commitment in the region, the GCC states have also sought to purchase advanced weapons capabilities. The GCC states collectively possess air superiority over Iran and the ability, at least in principle, to project military power against Iran in case of conflict. The UAE sought to enhance its advantage by signing a deal worth \$23.3 billion for F-35 fighter aircraft, MQ-9 *Reaper* UAVs and advanced munitions with the US in November 2020.²⁷ The deal has stalled since early 2021, however, partly due to the stringent conditions imposed by the US and the UAE's unwillingness to commit to them. In response to the US's denying them access to missiles and armed UAVs, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have turned to other sources including China and Turkiye to obtain those capabilities.²⁸

Beyond conventional capabilities, Saudi Arabia is a candidate for nuclear hedging as a means of deterring Iran. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's pledge in March 2018 that 'if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, [Saudi Arabia] will follow suit as soon as possible' and a more recent statement by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan in December 2022 that 'if Iran gets an operational nuclear weapon, all bets are off' appeared to be aimed both at dissuading Iran from weaponising and at incentivising the US to formalise its security commitment to the Gulf region.²⁹ Riyadh's January 2023 announcement that it would begin to use domestic uranium resources to obtain an independent domestic nuclear fuel cycle could be interpreted as a nuclear hedge. Although the US and Saudi governments

signed a memorandum of understanding on nuclear-energy cooperation in 2008, US-Saudi negotiations on a 123 agreement remain stuck due to disagreements over non-proliferation conditions.³⁰ The US has sought to limit Saudi Arabia's ability to engage in nuclear hedging by requiring it to follow the UAE's example in foregoing the right to uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing and to sign an Additional Protocol with the IAEA, which Riyadh has refused.³¹ In any case, Saudi Arabia's civil nuclear programme has proceeded at a slow pace over the past decade, and while Riyadh launched a tender for a 2.8GW two-reactor project in June 2022, it has yet to select a vendor.³²

Containment

The United States' policy of containing Iran rests on a strategy of isolating it diplomatically and economically. Since the 1979 revolution the US has used economic sanctions in an attempt to persuade Iran to stop supporting terrorism and agree to limits on its nuclear programme.³³ It has also imposed wide-ranging secondary sanctions prohibiting foreign firms from transacting with Iran, thereby seeking to sever the country from the global economy. Although the US lifted its secondary sanctions following the 2015 JCPOA, the Trump administration withdrew from the agreement and reimposed all US sanctions as part of a 'maximum pressure' campaign in 2018. The Biden administration has announced that it wants a return to the JCPOA, though negotiations have yet to produce an agreement. As a result, US sanctions remain in effect.³⁴

Washington has sought to engender greater compliance with its sanctions on Iran among the GCC states. In 2017 the US and the six GCC states set up the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) to track, jointly designate and coordinate action against terrorist groups and their financial networks.³⁵ Since its creation the TFTC has designated dozens of IRGC funders and affiliated groups.³⁶ Bahrain has taken a particularly strong role in enforcing sanctions, in 2021 suing 13 banks – including the Central Bank of Iran – over alleged money laundering and sanctions evasion and freezing US\$1.3bn in assets.³⁷

Although the GCC states are generally in favour of containing Iran, the UAE, Oman and Qatar view their

economic ties with Iran as a useful source of leverage and would therefore be unlikely to attempt to cut such ties completely. In the financial year ending March 2022, the UAE surpassed China as the leading destination for Iran’s exports, purchasing 68% of the country’s non-oil exports.³⁸ In fact, the UAE and Iran have set a target of reaching US\$30bn in bilateral annual trade by 2025.³⁹ Iran has also sought to use Dubai’s and Sharjah’s financial and shipping networks to circumvent Western sanctions. As a result, the US Treasury has imposed sanctions on UAE-registered corporations for violating US sanctions on Iranian oil and petrochemicals.⁴⁰ Under Western pressure the UAE has taken measures to tighten financial regulation and limit sanctions evasion.⁴¹

Similarly, Oman has been an important economic partner of Iran. Its ports, like those of the UAE, have been used to smuggle goods into Iran and evade sanctions.⁴² More importantly, Omani banks helped Iran secure US\$57bn in foreign reserve assets following the 2015 nuclear deal, and although the US sanctioned one of Iran’s most important banks, Bank Saderat, it resumed operations in Muscat in May 2017.⁴³ Given its greater commitment to diplomacy and neutrality on Iran compared to its Gulf neighbours, Oman is unlikely to implement financial restrictions targeting the Iranian regime or Iranian businesses. Iran has also announced the revival of a gas project with Oman, highlighting the growth of its energy diplomacy as it seeks to present itself as an energy exporter.⁴⁴ Qatar has also publicly opposed the tightening of oil sanctions on Iran and, particularly during the Gulf rift-inspired blockade from 2017–21, expanded cooperation with Iran on multiple issues ranging from trade and investment to a planned connection of the two countries’ power grids.⁴⁵

Engagement

The negotiations leading up to the 2015 JCPOA were the most significant period of US diplomatic engagement with Iran over its nuclear programme. The GCC states have been critical of the JCPOA negotiations for two main reasons – firstly they have protested against their exclusion from the negotiations, advocating a more inclusive format that would allow for regional participation; and secondly they have criticised the JCPOA for focusing exclusively on Iran’s nuclear programme and

setting aside other aspects of Iranian behaviour including its missile programme and its support for non-state armed groups. The GCC states have instead called for comprehensive talks simultaneously addressing all the main aspects of Iran’s behaviour, which they see as interlinked. Since the GCC states view Iran’s nuclear programme as less of a threat to them than its missile and UAV programmes and regional activity, they have no interest in seeing the US and the rest of the P5+1 expend the bulk of their sanctions leverage on securing nuclear-related commitments from Tehran.

Despite their reservations regarding the JCPOA negotiations, the GCC states have converged on the need to engage diplomatically with Iran. Saudi Arabia has engaged in five rounds of talks with Iran since 2021, and Kuwait and the UAE reinstated their ambassadors to Tehran in 2022. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced a Chinese-facilitated deal for the full resumption of bilateral relations, though the parameters of the deal, including whether an understanding has been reached on Yemen, remain unclear. In general the Saudi–Iranian talks have only had partial success. It therefore remains unclear if the two sides resolved their disagreement on sequencing, wherein Iran wanted to restore diplomatic relations before engaging on regional issues, whereas Saudi Arabia previously insisted on obtaining regional commitments from Iran before it re-establishes diplomatic relations. It also is not clear that the restoration of relations will

Table 2: Timeline of GCC–Iran diplomatic relations

Year	Event
2016	Crowds attack Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran in protest at the execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. In response, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar cut ties with Iran, while the UAE and Kuwait downgrade ties and recall ambassadors. Oman makes no change to its diplomatic representation in Iran.
2017	Qatar reinstates diplomatic relations with Iran in the wake of the June 2017 ‘Gulf rift’. ⁴⁷
2019	Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of being responsible for the attack on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais.
2021	Saudi Arabia and Iran initiate direct talks at the Baghdad Summit. UAE National Security Advisor Shaikh Tahnoon bin Zayed visits Tehran to restore relations.
2022	Kuwait and the UAE upgrade relations with Iran and reinstate their ambassadors to Tehran.
2023	Saudi Arabia and Iran announce the restoration of diplomatic ties, including the re-opening of embassies.

Source: IISS

have a moderating effect on Iran's regional behaviour. The agreement comes in the context of previous proxy attacks on Saudi Arabia, and some other attacks that were probably stopped by US engagement. For instance, according to US and Saudi intelligence, Iran was preparing for an attack on Saudi Arabia in October 2022, but appears to have been dissuaded by US warnings that it would 'not hesitate to act in the defence of [US] interests and partners in the region'.⁴⁶ If attacks and attack-planning stop now that relations are in place, engagement will have proved a useful strategy. However, if Iran or its proxies continue to attack Saudi Arabia, this particular diplomatic 'breakthrough' will be seen as hollow. Nevertheless, the GCC states

continue to advocate a negotiated agreement over Iran's nuclear programme.

One potential area for indirect sanctions relief is UN Security Council Resolution 2664 (2022). UNSCR 2664 was initiated by the US and Ireland to enable humanitarian aid while upholding robust sanctions – with safeguards to protect against abuse and evasion by sanctioned entities, including by establishing reporting requirements to ensure detection and mitigation of possible aid diversion. UNSCR 2264 could allow the US, the UK, and other, like-minded countries to provide humanitarian assistance in Iran, including by building hospitals, to aid the Iranian people directly without benefiting the regime or the IRGC.

Conclusion

On the current trajectory, it is highly likely that Iran will continue down the path towards the development of a nuclear-weapons capability, with the West reacting with increasing sanctions and tentative diplomatic openings. The GCC states have already begun a process of adjustment and realignment of their policies and defensive postures to take a nuclear-armed Iran into account. In the meantime, China and Russia are both taking advantage of the tactical and operational opportunities presented by these developments, albeit from different perspectives and with different long-term aims. The worst possible outcome would be a regional conflict initiated by a US or Israeli attempt to damage or destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure, followed by an Iranian decision to escalate into a regional war that would certainly have catastrophic economic and security consequences. As for the possible positive outcomes, the most realistic is for Iran and the West to find an equilibrium short of weaponisation – with concomitant transparency – that allows time and space for other approaches to deal with the broader threats that Iran poses.

It is imperative that the West engage with the GCC states in seeking such a positive outcome, and there is a role for the UK should it choose to support such an endeavour. As this report shows, there is increasing, if fragile, policy convergence among the GCC states and this should be encouraged, specifically in order to develop a broader and more far-reaching policy of containment, deterrence and engagement. If organised and coordinated properly, such a policy may help mitigate

the broader threats Iran poses – including its development and proliferation of longer-range weapons and its related support for non-state armed groups, including through the transfer of military technology. Work is required to encourage the GCC states to further converge in their views on the level of threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran and likely regional consequences, as well as in recognising the wisdom of a common and unified approach. Work also is required to demonstrate to the US and Israel that a common approach short of war is both desirable and possible, and that abandoning the region to Russian and Chinese influence would be unwise.

It is by no means assured that the GCC states will achieve complete convergence in their threat perceptions, or in their policy prescriptions for dealing with the Iranian problem. At the same time, Russia's military cooperation with Iran could change the military balance in the region and shift Saudi Arabia's calculus away from China and Russia and back towards the West. If the West does not anticipate and embrace such a shift, the consequences for the region could be dire. For instance, if the US and other, like-minded states do not increase their engagement with Saudi Arabia, particularly in order to increase its deterrence capacities and provide adequate, credible security assurances, Riyadh is likely to begin down the path of developing its own nuclear programme. A regional nuclear proliferation cascade, once seen as unlikely, would suddenly become a plausible development, creating further regional instability.

Notes

- 1 In this report, 'unconstrained' refers to Iran no longer being constrained by the JCPOA or by its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and (still unratified) Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency.
- 2 Director General, International Atomic Energy Agency, 'NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran', GOV/2021/42, 7 September 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/22/09/gov2022-42.pdf>; and Mark Landler, 'Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned', *New York Times*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.
- 3 The JCPOA limited Iran to 30 IR-6 advanced centrifuges for testing purposes, but Iran is now operating more than 900 centrifuges in six cascades according to the IAEA director general's latest report on the status of its enrichment capacity. Director General, International Atomic Energy Agency, 'Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)', GOV/2023/8, 28 February 2023, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/23/03/gov2023-8.pdf>.
- 4 Director General, International Atomic Energy Agency, 'NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran', GOV/2023/9, 4 March 2023, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/23/03/gov2023-9.pdf>.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Babak Dehghanpisheh, 'Iran Says It Will Quit Global Nuclear Treaty If Case Goes to U.N.', Reuters, 20 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-idUSKBN1ZJ0ML>.
- 7 Director General, International Atomic Energy Agency, 'Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)', GOV/2023/8.
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- 9 Ellen Nakashima and Joby Warrick, 'Iran Sends First Shipment of Drones to Russia for Use in Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 29 August 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/29/iran-drones-russia-ukraine-war>.
- 10 In 2003 Saudi Arabia established the National Dialogue Forum, which was notable for its inclusion of Shi'ites, women and liberals alongside representatives of the Kingdom's political and religious establishments.
- 11 Tobias Borck, Darya Dolzikova and Jack Senogles, 'Chain Reactions: The Iranian Nuclear Programme and Gulf Security Dynamics', Royal United Services Institute – Occasional Paper, July 2022, <https://static.rusi.org/338-Iran-GCC.pdf>.
- 12 'United Arab Emirates Reinstates Ambassador to Iran After Six-year Absence', *Guardian*, 22 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/22/united-arab-emirates-reinstates-ambassador-to-iran-after-six-year-absence>.
- 13 See, for example, Ludovica Castelli, 'Why Does Saudi Arabia Want to Acquire the Nuclear Fuel Cycle?', Stimson Center, 3 March 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/why-does-saudi-arabia-want-to-acquire-the-nuclear-fuel-cycle>.
- 14 In the IISS's view, however, Iran already possesses a considerable arsenal of short- and medium-range nuclear-capable missiles that allow it to threaten its neighbours. Whereas Iran may potentially agree to limit the range of its long-range missiles capable of striking targets across Europe, in order to reassure European states, it is highly unlikely to agree to any limits on the numbers or warhead capacities of its short- or medium-range missiles, which threaten the Gulf states and are viewed by Iran as an integral component of its defence strategy.
- 15 According to the IAEA, a Significant Quantity (SQ) of highly enriched uranium is approximately 20 kg of 95% HEU. By this calculation Iran is approaching three SQs' worth of 60% HEU (approximately 43.1 kg is one SQ).
- 16 As reported in the IAEA Board of Governors' reports on Iran's compliance with UNSCR 2231 in 2021.
- 17 Raffi Berg and Tom Bateman, 'Biden: US Prepared to Use Force to Stop Iran Getting Nuclear Arms', BBC News, 14 July 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62155165>; and Amnah Ibraheem and William Alberque, 'Iran Approaches the Nuclear Threshold', IISS blog, 10 November 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/11/iran-approaches-the-nuclear-threshold>.
- 18 Jonathan Stevenson, *Overseas Bases and US Strategy: Optimising America's Military Footprint*, Adelphi 484–486 (Abingdon: Routledge for the IISS, 2022), p. 53. exert political influence

and deter potential adversaries since the Second World War. But fatigue with America's 'forever wars', as well as more nuanced financial and strategic reasons, has inclined the public and policy community to favour reducing US global military activities and overseas presence. In this Adelphi book, Jonathan Stevenson argues that this desire does not necessarily translate into sound strategy. Overseas bases are a key element of the reassurance required to resurrect and bolster America's reputation among its allies and adversaries. Meanwhile, strategic imperatives and geopolitical realities impose restraints in every theatre. The fluidity prevailing in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific counsels maintaining forward-deployed forces there at roughly the current level. Russia's confrontational posture towards NATO and invasion of Ukraine, as well as NATO's short- and medium-term reliance on US capabilities, require the American presence in Europe to increase and expand eastward. The US should not commit itself to a foreign policy that is heavy on forward-deployed military power and light on diplomacy. But paradoxically, reducing forward military presence may not be consistent with a policy that is less focused on military power as a means of achieving stability and security."

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- 21 C. Todd Lopez, 'U.S., Gulf Nations Assess Same Threats in Middle East', US Department of Defense blog, 13 February 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3297191/us-gulf-nations-assess-same-threats-in-middle-east>.
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