

# The United States, Russia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: A New Regional Order in the Middle East?\*

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The transformations the Middle East has been through since the Arab uprisings of the 2010s, also known as the Arab Spring, have been the subject of intense debate in the literature. In this regard, a relevant issue is the role played by the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) and Russia in the face of the United States' regional influence. Is Russia's involvement in the Gulf determined exclusively by the logic of great power rivalry, or are there specific dynamics in GCC-Russia relations? Why have GCC states been seeking to diversify their relations with the great powers, a process that includes varying degrees of engagement with Russia, since the context of the Arab uprisings? Taking into account these questions, this article aims to analyze the interactions between Russia, the United States, and the GCC countries since the Arab uprisings of the 2010s. It is argued that, although the intensification of Russian involvement in the Gulf has been enabled by the perception of a US withdrawal from the region, such involvement has an autonomous character based on mutual interests with the GCC countries. Furthermore, the consolidation of the GCC states as a largely autonomous center of power in the Middle East is stressed, a condition that enhances these countries' ability to develop, with a hedging behavior, relations with both the United States and Russia in a complex regional order.

**Keywords:** United States; Russia; Middle East; Gulf Cooperation Council; Persian Gulf.

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The international scenario engendered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has drawn attention once again to the relations between the great powers and Middle Eastern countries. Particularly in the case of the states that make up the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC): Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Oman (also known as the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf).

While the GCC countries have struggled to reach a consensus on foreign policy issues in recent years, the Russo-Ukrainian War has had a different impact on their alliance system. In terms of trends, Qatar has adopted stances that are closer to those of Ukraine and the United States, while Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE have taken stances leaning comparatively more toward Russia. Oman and Kuwait, in turn, have been taking stances between these two poles, in which the Kuwaiti government has strongly criticized the Russian invasion (ULRICHSEN, 2023). On the other hand, none of the GCC countries has agreed to comply with Western sanctions against Russia. It should be noted, in this regard, that despite being important historical allies of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the UAE — two key countries in the Gulf and the Middle East as a whole — not only have not adopted sanctions, but have intensified their economic and political relations with Russia.

This behavior by GCC countries becomes particularly relevant analytically in view of the historical interest of the great powers—especially the United States—in the Gulf. Amid a process of consolidating the United States' status as a global superpower after World War II, US interest in the Gulf has been basically focused on two main factors: ensuring the most developed capitalist economies' access to the region's oil and preventing any power considered hostile to US interests from establishing control over these resources. Based on these interests, a policy of 'containment' of potential rivals of the United States in the region was engendered (SICK, 2018). The Gulf War in 1991 and the occupation of Iraq in 2003 confirmed the role of the United States as the great power with the most involvement in the region, acting to protect allied regimes and confront adversaries by economic, military, and diplomatic means. In the words of Phillips (2020), the involvement of the United States in the Middle East in the 1990s and 2000s has created perceptions about a 'Pax Americana' in the region, which seemed to reflect a unipolarity in the international order centered around the power of the United States.

Nevertheless, there had been signs of fissures in this geopolitical structure or perception for some time (PHILLIPS, 2020). Under Barack Obama (2009-2017), the United States began to advocate greater involvement in Asia and the Pacific to the detriment of other regions (GERGES, 2013). Even at a time of intense battles between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, this strategic reorientation, in view of the rise of China, became consensual in US foreign policy under the Trump and Biden administrations (KAYE, 2021). In addition to this geopolitical pivot, several episodes since the 2010s have also fed perceptions about a withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East. Some examples in this regard include: the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021; the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal without any kind of diplomatic counterproposal in 2018; the reluctance to employ military force to conduct operations for regime change; and the withdrawal of support to the allied regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt after the 2011 protests (FRIEDMAN, 2021; PHILLIPS, 2020; ULRICHSEN, 2023).

Given this situation, the presence of the United States and the regional order in the Gulf and the Middle East have been the subject of intense debate in the literature. Some analyses argue that the United States is effectively leaving the Middle East (POLLACK, 2022). Conversely, several authors have argued that the United States in fact maintains a strong presence in the Middle East, far exceeding that of Russia and China, as illustrated by the extensive US military presence in the region and the continuity of close military cooperation relations between the United States and several Middle Eastern states, especially GCC countries (COLLEY, 2023; KAYE, 2021). In the literature related to the presence of the great powers in the Middle East, there is even the perspective that the persistence of a security order sustained by the United States with the Arab monarchies of the Gulf is precisely a factor that facilitates the penetration of other states — like Russia — in the region, because the existence of such a structure would allow extra-regional countries to be involved in the Gulf without having to bear the costly security commitments taken on by Washington (SIM and FULTON, 2019). Other analyses, in turn, question the very description of the United States as a power historically capable of shaping the order in the Middle East — even in the 1990s and 2000s, when the United States had relatively more power in the international system (LYNCH, 2022; PHILLIPS, 2020). According to this interpretation,

the ‘Pax Americana’ would be more of a perception than an actual condition (PHILLIPS, 2020).

Regardless of the words used to refer to the change of conduct of the United States in the Middle East (including ‘disengagement’, ‘withdrawal’, or ‘abandonment’), as well as the fact that the US remains the great power with the greatest power projection capabilities in the region, it has become virtually a consensus in specialized literature that there is a ‘post-American’ moment in the Middle East — that is, a regional order in which several states, including Russia and GCC countries, have shown increasing protagonism and influence, calling into question the United States’ influence in the region (FRIEDMAN, 2021; GERGES, 2013; KAYE, 2021; LYNCH, 2022; PHILLIPS, 2020; SIM and FULTON, 2019).

In this regard, part of the interpretations regarding the new historical moment in the Middle East highlights the moves made by the great powers as the main causes of this process. These views consider that the fact that the United States has adopted a less interventionist policy is a crucial factor encouraging great powers such as Russia and China to increase their presence in the Middle East and the Gulf and position themselves as alternative partners for GCC governments. The change in perception by regional powers about the roles of external actors has also generated uncertainties and changes in the former’s international behavior, as they have sought to assume greater prominence and diversify their foreign policy partnerships (COLLEY, 2023; FRIEDMAN, 2021; POLLACK, 2022). This kind of analysis, therefore, builds its argument in a dual direction movement—that is, it highlights the reduction of the protagonism of the United States and the increase of Russia’s activism, illustrated mainly by the Russian military intervention in the Syrian War.

Meanwhile, other interpretations underscore structural factors: the changes in the relations between regional powers and the great powers would be combined with the transformations in the relative power structure in the international system, in which the transition to a multipolar order would be reflected in the Middle East in the form of greater regional protagonism and pragmatism exercised by regional powers, by Russia, and by China (GERGES, 2013; KAYE, 2021; LYNCH, 2022; PHILLIPS, 2020; SIM and FULTON, 2019).

In view of these initial considerations, this work aims to look into the interactions between Russia, the United States, and the GCC states since the Arab

uprisings in the 2010s, and to answer the following questions: is the Russian involvement in the Gulf determined exclusively by the logic of rivalry between great powers or are there dynamics specific to relations between Russia and the GCC countries? Why have GCC countries been seeking to diversify their relations with great powers since the 2010s, a process that includes varying degrees of rapprochement with Russia?

To proceed with the analysis and answer these questions, we believe it is necessary to understand the dynamic interactions involving agents and structures, as well as the historical processes that connect these two dimensions. When the rivalries between the great powers of the international system escalate, given the uncertainties regarding the outcome of the confrontation between them, less powerful states may adopt different types of behavior, including alignment with one of the rival great powers, neutrality, or an ambiguous stance aimed at preserving their autonomy in relation to the parties that are battling. The latter option has been described as a hedging strategy, in which less powerful states aim to avoid becoming entangled in great power rivalries and to obtain gains amid this context, while also having flexibility to change their positioning under new circumstances (LIM and COOPER, 2015).

Nevertheless, hedging strategies strongly depend on the existence or not of a path dependence in the relationship between the less powerful state and the rival great powers (LIM and COOPER, 2015). The notion of path dependence is based on the assumption that choices made in the past influence — albeit not necessarily determine — choices made in the present. That is, international politics' actors react to the constraints imposed by historical processes, but there is always the possibility of changes that can unfold on new pathways (LEITHNER and LIBBY, 2017). Incremental or limited changes can occur without disrupting the mechanisms of continuity in the behavior of agents (LEITHNER and LIBBY, 2017, pp. 17-18). Changes that are more significant can be associated with the so-called critical junctures, that is, contexts of relaxation of structural constraints in which political actors see themselves having more possibilities for action with greater potential impact in terms of lasting disruptions of past institutional and behavioral patterns (CAPOCCIA, 2016). In the context of relations between the great powers and other states in international politics, arguably the history of relations between the latter and the great powers, in terms of

the existence or not of alliances or disputes with the great powers, plays a relevant role in the possibility of adopting hedging strategies (LIM and COOPER, 2015).

In this regard, we acknowledge that Russia's penetration in the Gulf since the 2010s has been facilitated, to a large extent, by the perception of a US withdrawal from the region. On the other hand, we argue that even if Russia has not demonstrated an interest or ability to exercise the role the United States has historically played in the foreign policy of the GCC countries. The political and economic connections developed between Russia and the GCC states have an autonomous character based on mutual interests — that is, they are not exclusively conditioned by disputes between great powers or by trends in the relationships between GCC countries and the United States.

Moreover, we understand that the movements observed in the Middle East in recent years may show signs of profound changes in the regional order, and not just tactical reorientations depending on the circumstances. We thus consider an explanation that is becoming increasingly strong, according to which, in addition to the changes in the international order resulting from the movements of the great powers, which have generated a global scenario of uncertainties with possible regional repercussions, a new regional order is being constituted in which GCC states have increasingly presented themselves as a center of power in the Middle East (HANIEH, 2018; LYNCH, 2022). In this regard, we believe that it is worth drawing particular attention to the role played by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Amid the uncertainties associated with the politics of the great powers — especially regarding the level of US involvement in the region and the results of the geopolitical confrontation opposing Washington and Moscow in recent years —, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are precisely the countries that have become closer and closer to Russia and maintained important ties with the United States, thus illustrating the hedging logic. Having this condition of being a center of power with broad autonomy in foreign policy implies the search for pragmatic partnerships with great powers and the refusal to take on relations of subordination and unequivocal alignment with them. The regional order in the Gulf and the Middle East therefore seems to be heading towards a complex system, with foundations for a potentially lasting involvement of Russia concurrently with the continuity of a strong presence of the United States.

To understand this process, we have divided this article into four sections. The first section offers a historical overview of the involvement of the United States and

Russia/the Soviet Union in the Gulf and the Middle East more broadly, focusing on the period from the Cold War up to the late 2000s. The second section reviews the processes and events associated with the context of the Arab uprisings that happened since the 2010s. The third section then discusses the interactions between the United States, Russia, and the GCC countries in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022. Finally, the fourth and last section offers our final remarks.

### **Russia and the United States in the Persian Gulf: history**

There are important elements to the historical background of the disputes between the United States and Russia/the Soviet Union in the battle for influence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf dating back to before the time generally acknowledged as the starting point of the Cold War rivalry. After the end of World War II, the Soviet Union aimed to extend its military occupation of northern Iran beyond the original time lines defined by the Allies in 1943, as Moscow was interested in Iran's oil reserves. Moreover, the Soviet Union fostered Azerbaijani and Kurdish autonomist movements with separatist potential, in the hopes to establish pro-Soviet satellites from Iranian territory. The US had a very negative view about these actions by Stalin regarding Iran, which led to tensions between the great powers and contributed to cement the US doctrine of containment of the Soviet Union (ZUBOK, 2007, pp. 36-49).

From Moscow's point of view, having a direct border with the Middle East in southern portions of the Soviet territory meant that the region was strategically relevant, and there was great sensitivity over the presence of Western powers in the Middle East. The Soviet Union saw the many different initiatives fostered by the United States (and the United Kingdom) to form regional blocs as latent threats, and it sought to maintain a 'security belt' around its southern borders (KHAZANOV and OLIMPIEV, 2017, pp. 27-62).

The United States' increasing involvement in the Gulf came with the dismantling of the British presence east of the Suez Canal, announced in the late 1960s. Initially, as part of what became known as the Nixon Doctrine, the United States entrusted the achievement of its regional interests largely to Saudi Arabia and Iran (SICK, 2018, pp. 238-239).

The expansion of the Soviet Union's presence in the Middle East was largely due to tensions and disappointments experienced by governments in the region over the United States and Western powers. Aiming at achieving more autonomous foreign and economic development policies that did not tie their countries to the interests of the United States or the former European colonial powers, several governments and political organizations in the Middle East saw the Soviet Union as an alternative for diplomatic, economic, and military partnership. So countries including Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, where Arab nationalists came to power, became the main regional partners of the Soviet Union.

The relations between these countries and the Soviet Union tended toward convergence in their opposition to the United States and its regional allies, particularly Israel. In the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973, the war between the allies of the great powers in the Middle East sparked the risk of direct military confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States and its European allies. It should be noted, however, that the Soviet Union did not establish relations of control over its partners in the Middle East, which maintained a significant degree of autonomy. Moreover, their relationships with Moscow were regularly marked by tensions over regional policy issues and the status of communist organizations in these countries.

On the other hand, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf remained, throughout most of the Cold War, a space where the Soviet Union encountered significant difficulties to project its influence. The reasons for this were largely about the mutual perception regarding strong ideological incompatibilities. The Soviet Union tended to view the conservative Arab monarchies of the Gulf as hostile states aligned with the West. In turn, from the point of view of the Arab monarchies, the Soviet Union was often viewed negatively, as a state of communist ideology that promoted an international revolutionary agenda. In addition to its own support for Arab nationalist governments, which often rivaled conservative Arab regimes, the Soviet Union supported some political organizations that were operating to overthrow the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. In this context, of all the states that would eventually make up the GCC, only Kuwait built relatively close relations with the Soviet Union (KATZ, 2022; SURKOV, 2021). Meanwhile, the largest and historically most influential GCC state, Saudi Arabia, was often strongly critical of the Soviet Union, classifying it as a threat to regional stability (KHAZANOV and OLIMPIEV, 2017, pp. 179-187).



The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 caused fear among several Middle Eastern countries, especially among GCC oil-producing states, as Soviet military advances in Afghanistan put the Strait of Hormuz, in the Persian Gulf, within the reach of the Soviet air force. The war in Afghanistan added to other episodes that were seen by the United States and its allies as serious threats to oil supplies on the world market. The first one was the oil price hikes imposed by the Arab countries of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as a result of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, which contributed to pushing Western economies into recession. Also, the United States became increasingly concerned about the Gulf after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which brought to power a rival regime of the United States, and the Iran-Iraq War, which began in 1980 (LEFFLER, 1983). This scenario led then-President Jimmy Carter to announce, in 1980, what became known as the Carter Doctrine, warning that the United States was willing to use force to counter any attempts by 'external forces' to establish control over the Persian Gulf — regarded as an area of vital interest for the United States (CARTER, 1980). Since then, the United States has increased its military presence in the Gulf, having its connections with countries of the GCC, an organization founded in 1981, as a key factor (DANNREUTHER, 2021).

In the context of the Afghanistan and Iran-Iraq wars, the GCC's own existence was viewed with suspicion by the Soviet Union. It was, after all, an organization of countries close to the United States. In this regard, the Soviet government feared that the GCC could provide a background to boost the US military presence in the Gulf. Therefore, in 1980, the then Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev called for the neutralization of the Gulf. A Soviet proposal included elements such as the non-establishment of foreign military bases and nuclear weapons in the region, as well as respect for the non-alignment status of Gulf countries and the non-participation of the latter in military groups that had nuclear powers as members. Soviet interest in the removal of foreign military bases from the Gulf, as well as accusations that the United States aimed to establish a hegemony in the region, remained until the final years of the Cold War (FREEDMAN, 1991, pp. 90-96, pp. 269-271).

The time when Mikhail Gorbachev was the leader of the Soviet Union (1985-1991) was marked by foreign policy changes aimed at overcoming tensions with the United States. There was a particular pursuit of solutions for regional conflicts that could spill over into direct confrontation between the two superpowers.

Not only that, there was a reduced emphasis on Marxist-Leninist canons as guides of the Soviet approach to international politics (FREEDMAN, 1991, pp. 206-207). Such a shift was reflected in a clear reshaping of Soviet Middle East policy. A process then began of relative distancing from governments and organizations traditionally closer to Moscow in the Middle East. Concurrently, there were moves to reconnect with former regional rivals, like Israel and GCC countries. As of the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. After more than five decades of broken diplomatic relations, relations between the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia were officially re-established in 1991. Furthermore, the Persian Gulf was an important stage for the demonstration of the new Soviet approach to the Middle East: from the point of view of relations between the great powers, the rapprochement trends between Moscow and Washington could be seen in the reactions to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which ultimately led to the Gulf War of 1990-1991. The governments of the United States and the Soviet Union disapproved of the actions of Saddam Hussein's regime, a fact which eventually enabled the international military action led by the United States against Iraq.

This US-led military intervention was one of the key events in post-Cold War Gulf politics, helping to pave the way for the US' status as the leading great power in the region. As Marc Lynch pointed out, the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations in the 1990s aimed to shape the regional order according to US interests under the notion of unipolarity in the international system. The notion of the United States as a power that could shape the order of the Middle East remained in the following administrations, but, as in the 1990s, those efforts were far from a complete success. Factors including conflicting conceptions with countries in the region and suspicions about the firmness of the security commitments the United States could offer its allies contributed to limiting the United States' ability to shape the regional order of the Middle East according to its preferences (LYNCH, 2022).

In the early 1990s, Russia's foreign policy under Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) was marked by an intensification of the idea of a global partnership with the United States. This idea coexisted with the decay of Russian power, amid its turbulent transition to capitalism. Altogether, these factors have contributed to Russia greatly reducing its role in the Middle East. Still, the attempt to maintain the status of a global power on an equal footing with the United States, which pervaded the post-Cold War

period and became more acute after NATO interventions in the wars of disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, has caused Russia to increasingly position itself as a counterweight to US global influence.

In the 1990s, Russia, particularly in view of the country's precarious economic situation in the period, demonstrated a pragmatic approach, which saw the GCC states as potential investors and buyers of Russian weapons (KATZ, 2022; SURKOV, 2021). On the other hand, the conflict in the Russian North Caucasus became a flash point in the 1990s, when a political movement of Chechens (a predominantly Muslim people) struggled for the independence of Chechnya's territory from Russia, which led to a war between the separatists on one side and the Russian central government and its Chechen allies on the other. In this context, groups emerged associating Chechnya's independence with a state-building agenda with radical Islamist bases and multiethnic and transnational platforms. Islamist fighters from the Middle East joined Chechen secessionist forces, while the separatist movement received different types of support from Middle Eastern organizations (HAHN, 2007; MOORE and TUMELTY, 2008; TRENIN, MALASHENKO, and LIEVEN, 2004). In this context, the Saudi government's sympathy for Chechen secessionism in the 1990s displeased Russia (SURKOV, 2021).

Meanwhile, the Vladimir Putin era, from the 2000s onwards, has been marked by a recovery of Russia's power and status as a great power. Russian interest in the Middle East has been gradually increasing in this period. In this regard, the economic factor has been granted great importance, inasmuch as Russia aimed to approach traditional US allies in the region, which include the most economically prosperous countries in the Middle East (KATZ, 2022). However, the tipping point for Russia's growing involvement in the Middle East as a whole and the Persian Gulf in particular occurred amid the Arab uprisings of the 2010s.

### **The United States, Russia, and the GCC countries since the 2010s uprisings in the Middle East**

The Arab uprisings of the 2010s, also known as the Arab Spring, were pivotal events in contemporary Middle Eastern history. The crises and wars associated with this period accelerated transformations in the configuration of power and the role of the great powers in the region, playing a significant role in the interactions

between Russia, the United States, and the GCC countries in the more than a decade that has passed since then.

An important initial factor to consider in this context is the regional role of the GCC states. Bear in mind that the Arab monarchies of the Gulf have consolidated a position among the most dynamic and globally integrated economies in the Middle East, which has given them a unique capacity for economic involvement and political influence beyond the Gulf (HANIEH, 2018). In this regard, the crisis caused by the Arab uprisings and their consequences were seen by GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE as an opportunity to shape the Middle East according to their (sometimes conflicting) interests — for example, through direct participation or proxy interference in armed conflicts, as well as support for friendly political forces in several Middle Eastern countries (HANIEH, 2018; PHILLIPS, 2020).

The perspectives and policies of the great powers, of course, are another dimension of high analytical relevance. Unlike common views in Western countries, the uprisings in the Middle East were largely viewed with a negative bias in Russia. The Russian society and political elite often considered that the so-called Arab Spring followed the perceived script of the ‘color revolutions’ of the 2000s in countries in the post-Soviet space. Additionally, it was commonly believed that the uprisings did not have a liberal and democratizing potential, but rather had a potential for the collapse of states and the rise of extremist forces based on Islamist ideologies contrary to the political ‘status quo’ favored by the Russian government (ZVIAGEL’SKAIA, 2014, pp. 74-80). In this regard, the transnational connections between Middle Eastern Islamist groups and radical Islamists in Russia (and other countries in the post-Soviet space) were a factor of particular concern for the Russian government.

The disputes between the great powers were also a relevant element behind the intensification of Russia’s presence in the region. Particularly the 2011 events in Libya were a watershed moment for the Russian government. That year, under the Dmitry Medvedev administration (2008-2012), Russia abstained in a vote in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on a humanitarian intervention in Libya, which was in a state of civil war between the regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi and his opponents, which allowed the intervention to be authorized. However, the military operation, led by NATO countries with the participation of Qatar and the UAE, was ultimately instrumentalized for the overthrow of Gaddafi. Russia considered these actions an

abuse of the mandate conferred on the UNSC. In Moscow's view, the events in Libya showed a deleterious Western interventionism that should be contained to prevent the spread of instability in the Middle East.

Russian distrust has been further strengthened due to demands by the United States and its Western allies for the ousting of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The Russian government took an assertive approach in spaces such as the UN to obstruct attempts to impose sanctions on or internationally legitimize stances against Assad. This has included a pursuit to bar external military interventions against the Syrian regime. Furthermore, Russia has established itself as a crucial provider of economic and military support to the Syrian government (ALLISON, 2013; PHILLIPS, 2020). In September 2015, one of the moments when Assad was most threatened by his enemies, Russia began its military intervention in Syria, which is undoubtedly the great turning point for Russia's reinsertion into the Middle East (PHILLIPS, 2020; SOULEIMANOV and ABBASOV, 2020; TRENIN, 2018). It should be noted that Russia's military entry into the Syrian War has brought about the risk of a direct confrontation with the United States, as the US has carried out several military operations in Syria, including deploying troops on the ground (BELEN'KAIA, 2023; LAMOTHE, 2020; SCHMITT and GIBBONS-NEFF, 2018). In this context, by securing rights to use military infrastructure in Syria, Russia has signaled that it intends to remain a player closely involved in the Middle East in the long run.

The Syrian War has put Russia and several GCC countries — particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar — on opposite sides. While the Russian government consolidated itself as Assad's main supporter — operating in coalition with Iran, which for years had been the main regional rival of Saudi Arabia and the UAE —, GCC states, to varying degrees and with their own agendas, sometimes conflicting with each other, supported Syrian opposition groups and engaged in initiatives to promote international pressure against Assad (HATAHET, 2021; PHILLIPS, 2020). However, the military successes of Russia, the Assad regime, and the latter's other allies, such as Iran and the Lebanese group Hezbollah, have effectively contributed — along with the US reluctance to engage in military intervention for regime change — to ward off the possibility of overthrowing the Assad government.

This configuration of forces, in turn, generated new circumstances of critical juncture responsible for reshaping relations involving the GCC countries, Russia, and

the United States. As mentioned earlier, several moves by the United States government during the Arab Spring and its aftermath, including abandoning Mubarak and being reluctant to promote a military intervention for regime change in Syria, have resulted in increasing suspicions about the willingness of the United States to be involved in the Middle East and make alliance commitments with countries in the region (FRIEDMAN, 2021; PHILLIPS, 2020; ULRICHSEN, 2023). Simultaneously, in view of the intertwining of regional and global interests around the Syrian War, Moscow's military and diplomatic role in the conflict has made Russia become a significantly influential actor in the power dynamics of the Middle East. Russia has established itself as a pole of power simultaneously capable of obstructing and facilitating regional and external forces on different stages in the region. This is especially true for the GCC countries, which have political, economic, and security interests that are projected across different axes of the so-called Greater Middle East. For these countries, the invigorated role of Russia in the Middle East contributed to raising the perception of attractiveness or the need to develop dialogue with Moscow on regional issues (HATAHET, 2021). These factors, therefore, made up the scenario that stimulated the GCC member states to diversify their foreign policies in order to achieve their goals with autonomy and flexibility in face of the actions of the great powers and their reflections on the Middle East, adopting incremental changes in their foreign policies.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, eventually started to see Russia as an important interlocutor in the political and security dynamics in Syria and the Middle East, especially in the sense of seeking counterweights to the actions of Iran and Turkey in the region. On the Russian side, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf came to be seen as relevant interlocutors in the resolution of the Syrian conflict as they could exert influence on certain forces opposed to Assad. Moreover, given Russia's inability to sustain, alone, the necessary volume of investments for the reconstruction of Syria, it sees the GCC countries as potential sources of resources for these initiatives (HINNEBUSCH, 2020; KOZHANOV, 2022; MARDASOV and KOROTAYEV, 2021). Despite the still uncertain developments that will come from these efforts, the synergy between Russia and the UAE on the reconstruction of Syria was illustrated by the UAE government's criticism of the US sanctions policy against the Assad regime (AL

JAZEERA, 2021), which has been an obstacle to the influx of resources to areas controlled by the Syrian government.

Since the 2010s, there have also been parallel initiatives by the United States and Russia to resolve conflicts and organize the regional security architecture of the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, during the Trump administration (2017-2021), the United States sought to isolate Iran through military and economic pressures and attempts to form a regional alliance composed of GCC countries, Egypt, and Jordan (NURUZZAMAN, 2020). Russia, on the other hand, illustrating a kind of mediating role that has characterized its involvement in several regional issues in the Middle East (FRAIHAT and LODYGIN, 2021; TRENIN, 2018), has demonstrated a more conciliatory approach. In 2019, the Putin administration released a document titled 'Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf', based on ideas from the 1990s and 2000s. An updated version of the document was published in August 2021. The Russian government's proposal focuses on establishing a collective security system with the participation of regional and extra-regional states. Factors in the Russian proposal include elements such as mutual security guarantees, arms control, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state in the Persian Gulf, and refraining from the use or threat of force (RUSSIA, 2021).

In addition to security issues and regional geopolitical disputes, it should be noted that the intensification of Russia's involvement with GCC countries since the 2010s reflects economic drives that have their own dynamics — that is, they do not develop exclusively as a result of its geopolitical rivalry with the United States. Seeking alternatives amid the economic sanctions adopted by Western powers in the wake of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, Russia has seen the GCC countries as potential sources of investment for the development of the Russian economy, particularly for large infrastructure projects. The economic initiatives between Russia and the GCC countries —, which, notably, have not always become effective — have been therefore developed through particular action by the Russian state (KOZHANOV, 2022).

One of Russia's leading state-owned economic institutions, the Russian Direct Investment Fund ('Rossiiskii fond priamykh investitsii' — RFPI) has partnered with leading investment funds from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Kuwait. In 2018, GCC countries accounted for roughly 50 percent of the total volume of investment funds, including potential ones, of the RFPI. In this regard, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the

UAE stood out as sources of resources (ISSAEV and KOZHANOV, 2021, p. 888, pp. 894-895). Also in the economic field, the energy issue is also an important magnet for Russia's involvement with the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, since both sides are major oil producers and rely on the oil trade in global markets for their economic prosperity. On several occasions in recent years, Russia, within the scope of spaces such as OPEC+, has sought to coordinate oil volumes and prices with GCC countries, sometimes to no avail.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the convergences between Russia and GCC countries in the agenda to fight transnational Islamist organizations and ideologies that the rulers on both sides consider a threat to the political regimes in their countries. In the context of conflicts and instability in the Middle East, the Russian government has aimed to establish mechanisms for exchanging information with Saudi Arabia about the situation in the region. Concurrently, amid concerns that Middle Eastern sources could be offering support to radical Islamists in Russia and the post-Soviet space, Russia has sought, with significant success, to persuade the political and religious elites of the GCC countries to isolate religious ideological groups and strands seen negatively by Moscow (KOZHANOV, 2022). In the context of the North Caucasus, Russia has also seen the UAE as an important partner for promoting economic and political projects believed to contribute to stabilizing post-conflict Chechnya (SIM and FULTON, 2020, pp. 561-562).

In the overall context of increased interactions between Russia and the GCC countries, the country with which Moscow has established closest relations is the UAE, the first GCC state to sign a strategic partnership declaration with Russia, in 2018. In addition to the aforementioned investment cooperation, the UAE has also been involved in several military cooperation initiatives with Russia (SIM and FULTON, 2020). Russia and the UAE also had convergences in the conflict in Libya, supporting one side in the civil war (WALSH, 2020). According to the United States government, the UAE may even have funded mercenaries connected to the Russian government in Libya (MACKINNON and DETSCH, 2020).

### **The geopolitical consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022)**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created significant global political and economic impacts. Moscow's actions have contributed to further



intensifying antagonisms between, on the one hand, Russia and, on the other, the United States and its Western allies, which have been actively supporting Ukraine. Both the United States and Russia saw themselves encouraged to garner supporters or, at least, neutral positions regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War in order to strengthen their relative positions in the international system. Concurrently, the policies of economic pressure adopted by both sides have affected financial systems and international trade chains. The adoption of new sanctions led by Western powers against Russia particularly stands out, as they have led the Russian government to update its pursuit to expand economic relations with non-Western countries. In short, policy moves made by the great powers have contributed to generate more tensions and uncertainties at a global level, with potential repercussions in the Middle East.

The GCC states have not been excluded from these dynamics. In March 2022, all six GCC countries voted in favor of UN General Assembly resolution ES-11/1, which affirmed the commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemned the Russian invasion, demanding the end of Moscow's military operations on Ukrainian territory. Similarly, in October 2022, all GCC members voted in favor of resolution ES-11/4, which condemned and did not recognize Russian declarations of annexation of Ukrainian territories. On the other hand, in other similar initiatives at the UN, the GCC governments have not always aligned themselves with the United States, demonstrating the foreign policy autonomy of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, despite the condemnation of Russian actions at the UN, the governments of the GCC states did not adopt the sanctions imposed against Russia under the leadership of the United States and European countries, even though companies and institutions from GCC countries may take into account the effects of these sanctions on their operations (REUTERS, 2022; SMAGIN, 2023).

In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Russia factor gained new dimensions in US Middle East policy. For example, justifying his trip to the region in July 2022, which included a stay in Saudi Arabia and a meeting with leaders of GCC countries, Biden stated that the Middle East's energy resources were key to cushion the

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<sup>1</sup>In late February 2022, for example, the UAE abstained in a vote at the UNSC on a resolution mobilized by the United States that condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine. In November 2022, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE abstained in, while Qatar and Kuwait voted in favor of, the vote on a resolution mobilized by the United States and its allies that demanded reparations from Russia to Ukraine.

negative impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on the global energy supply (BIDEN, 2022). In Biden's own words, the United States would seek to "not leave a vacuum in the Middle East for Russia or China to fill" (UNITED STATES, 2022).

Particularly, the search for reducing international oil prices by increasing production stands out, since such measure could also negatively affect Russia's economic power, as the country is one of the world's major oil exporters and significantly depends on revenues from oil exports for its economic standing and, consequently, its military capabilities. As reported in the US media, the US government expected Saudi Arabia to increase its oil production, but the Saudi regime, in a coordinated decision with Russia and other OPEC+ countries in September and October 2022, eventually decided to reduce the volumes they produced. This decision by the Saudi government was another factor that shook its relations with the United States (KALIN; SAID and NISSENBAUM, 2022; MAZZETTI; WONG and ENTOUS, 2022).

The United States also started to demand that its partners in the Gulf adopt the sanctions imposed on Russia. However, there are obstacles to the US ability to ensure the alignment of its GCC partners. In addition to the structural factors previously mentioned in this work, we must bear in mind the repercussions of the actions and policy directions signaled by Biden for the GCC countries. It can be argued, for example, that the firmness of the United States' security commitments is still questioned. The UAE, for example, did not consider the Biden administration's response to the Yemeni armed organization Houthis' attacks on Abu Dhabi in January 2022 to be satisfactory (RAVID, 2022).

Finally, the Biden administration's insistence on publicly raising the issue of democracy and human rights has been a factor of tension, particularly in Saudi Arabia's case, due to the authoritarian character of the GCC governments (KALIN, SAID and NISSENBAUM, 2022). In this regard, the contrast between the behavior of the United States and Russia's approach is noticeable, as Russia not only avoids such attitudes, but also shows ideological convergences as it has a tendency toward aversion to certain anti-government grassroots mobilizations and certain Islamist organizations in the Middle East. This stance by Russia is certainly valued by the political elites of the GCC countries, as it expresses an openness to develop relations with the GCC states, including in the security realm, without expressing opinions on their domestic political issues (FRAIHAT and LODYGIN, 2021; HATAHET, 2021; RAMANI, 2020).

Furthermore, there is also evidence suggesting that the political and economic bonds built between Russia and the GCC states over the past few years may survive or even become stronger. Even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for example, Putin has often maintained contact with rulers of GCC countries, when both sides mentioned their desire to deepen relations and coordinate actions (RUSSIA, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). A Russia-GCC Ministerial meeting for Strategic Dialogue was held in Moscow in July 2023, when Russia and the GCC member states expressed their goal of deepening their relations, including in areas such as energy, trade, and investments (RUSSIA, 2023).

Amid the new economic restrictions imposed on Russia and Russian citizens by the United States and its allies, there are records of a growing number of properties purchased in the UAE by large Russian entrepreneurs, as well as the establishment of new business activities conducted by Russian citizens in the UAE (BLOOMBERG, 2022; TURAK, 2022). The UAE'S openness to receiving major Russian businessmen has displeased the United States, which seeks the international extension of sanctions against the so-called Russian 'oligarchs'. The issue has become a topic on the agenda in relations between the UAE and the United States, and the former has been showing signs of resistance to US demands (IRISH, 2022). Moreover, the UAE has become a source of parallel imports of several products to Russia (SMAGIN, 2023). Finally, it should be mentioned that the UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia, has significantly increased its imports of Russian oil for domestic consumption or re-export to other countries (FAUCON and SAID, 2023).

As mentioned earlier, the political and economic initiatives made jointly between Russia and the GCC countries have not always reached the potential idealized by their protagonists. Additionally, Russia has shown neither the capacity nor the interest to take on the role historically assumed by the United States as a security provider for several GCC states. The Russian government, for example, has not proposed the types of regional blocs or military presence that mark the United States' presence in the Gulf. As Dannreuther (2021) pointed out, the extensive US military presence in GCC countries means that ultimately the United States would be the most obvious ally for GCC states in the event of a regional security crisis threatening their ruling regimes. This prospect was illustrated, for example, in November 2022. Amid a new wave of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the

Iranian government accusing Saudi Arabia of supporting anti-government protests in Iran, US forces acted as a military deterrent against Tehran (SELIGMAN, 2022).

The Russian analyst Nikolay Kozhanov (2022) also mentions other reasons that may limit the development of relations between Russia and the GCC countries. As the United States remains a central actor in the foreign and security policy of the GCC countries, 'corrections' by the US government in its approach to issues that have displeased the Arab monarchies of the Gulf can restore synergies with the United States and, thus, reduce the room for maneuver by Russia with GCC states. Furthermore, the continuation of close relations between Russia and Iran, an important partner for Moscow on different Middle East issues and other issues of Russian interest, may cause distrust in certain GCC countries that traditionally have negative views on Iran (KOZHANOV, 2022). Bear in mind that, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Russia has made efforts to become closer to Iran by using the discourse of building a counterweight to the United States in the formation of a multipolar world order (BELEN'KAIA, 2022). In the more specific context of the conflict, there is evidence that Russia has been using drones of Iranian origin in military operations in Ukraine (KURMANAEV and SANTORA, 2022).

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Arab monarchies of the Gulf have generally formed their networks of contact within Russia, either at the governmental level (national and subnational) or within the framework of Muslim religious authorities. The GCC countries therefore appear to have formed kinds of lobby groups with the Russian elite (KOZHANOV, 2022). In this regard, as mentioned above, while Russia's penetration in the Gulf since the 2010s has been made possible, to a large extent, by the perception that there were gaps left by the United States in the region, it can be argued that the political and economic connections between Russia and the GCC countries have reached a certain degree of autonomy. That is, they are not conditioned exclusively by juncture-related movements in the relations between GCC states and the United States. Consequently, these ties may lay the foundations for the continued development of relations between Russia and the GCC states, potentially enabling Moscow to consolidate positions of influence in the Gulf.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, along the rapprochement drive between Russia and the GCC countries, other similar moves have been made in the foreign policy of GCC states. Particularly since 2021, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have taken steps to get

closer to Iran and Turkey, which had been regional rivals to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Steps toward mitigating internal tensions in the GCC opposing Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other, have also been taken (FOUAD and SHELINE, 2023; JABBOUR, 2022). In 2023, the Saudi government agreed on measures to normalize relations with Iran having China as a mediator, a country with which Saudi Arabia has been increasingly establishing economic relations (WONG and NEREIM, 2023). Finally, it should be noted that, also in 2023, contrary to the policy of the United States toward the Assad government, Saudi Arabia took steps toward a rapprochement with Syria, which facilitated the latter's return to the Arab League (CAFIERO and MILLIKEN, 2023).

These actions show the GCC countries' willingness to engage in attempts at de-escalation rather than prolonging political rivalries that have translated into direct tensions and proxy conflicts with other countries in recent years. As such, the recent acts of conciliation mentioned above suggest a pragmatism in the GCC states' approach to foreign policy, a pragmatism that differs from the different attempts at bloc formation that characterized much of Middle East politics since the Arab uprisings of the 2010s. This picture, in turn, suggests the consolidation of a complex regional order in which the Arab monarchies of the Gulf are a center of power endowed with broad autonomy and interested in pragmatically establishing relationships with different actors, which implies their unwillingness to submit to the political lines of the great powers. Therefore, similarly to patterns of behavior observed since the context of the Arab uprisings of the 2010s, the GCC countries, in the context of international tensions around the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have been avoiding unequivocal alignments with the rival great powers, maintaining flexibility and autonomy in their relations with them and in the search for solutions to regional disputes. At the same time, it is observed that the governments of the GCC countries seek to gain economic, diplomatic, and security benefits from their relations with both the United States and Russia.

## Conclusion

The Persian Gulf has historically attracted considerable interest from the great powers. That was the case during the Cold War, when the global confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union extended to the region. After the Russian retreat

from the Middle East in the 1990s, the Putin era has been marked by a gradual growth of Russian interest and influence in the region, in which the military intervention initiated in Syria in 2015 was a turning point. From then on, Russia has consolidated a renewed status as a great power in the Middle East.

The geopolitical confrontation between the United States and Russia, accentuated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has encouraged these two great powers to seek external alignments and support as widely as possible. The Middle East and the Persian Gulf, in particular, are not excluded from these dynamics, as the issues analyzed in this work show.

On the other hand, the governments of the GCC countries, in line with a hedging logic, demonstrate pragmatism, flexibility, and autonomy — while refusing to accept relations of subordination and unequivocal alignment with the great powers. They consider that both the United States and Russia can contribute to the achievement of their political, economic, and security goals, thus seeking to develop their relations with Washington and Moscow in degrees and areas that they consider convenient for their interests. As the political leaders of the GCC countries have concerns regarding both internal threats to their own regimes and the regional balance of power or external threats, these governments are more likely to seek new partnerships with global powers or states in the region. The recent regional conciliation measures mentioned in this work also exemplify such foreign policy approach.

Finally, we should bear in mind that the battle for influence between the great powers in the Gulf is intertwined with the fact that the GCC countries have intrinsic importance for Russia as potential economic partners and interlocutors on issues of mutual interest, such as combating certain Islamist organizations and ideologies regarded as threats to the political orders that sustain the ruling groups in Russia and in several Arab monarchies of the Gulf. Concurrently with the maintenance of the United States' status as the great power with the greatest power projection capabilities in the Gulf, Russian involvement with the GCC countries — particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have taken a leading role in the region — points to the constitution of a regional order with potential foundations to affirm Russia's lasting involvement.

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