

Turkey and the Persian Gulf: high hopes, limited capabilities

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In May, Turkey experienced a surge in diplomatic engagement with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The country hosted the foreign ministers of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), as well as the Vice President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Discussions focused on regional security, including the war in Iran and developments in the Strait of Hormuz. The parties also explored opportunities for cooperation in the economic, financial and energy sectors, as well as in the field of defence industry cooperation. These meetings reflected the intense pace of Turkish–Gulf diplomacy in 2026.

Over recent years, Ankara has sought to normalise its relations with the Persian Gulf states. It views the current conflict in the Middle East as an opportunity to advance these ties further. Turkey's main objectives are to secure Gulf support for its regional security initiatives (see '[Regional responsibility: Turkey's vision for the Middle East](#)'), while expanding economic cooperation and strengthening defence-industrial partnerships. Although the Gulf states appear increasingly receptive to Turkish proposals, significant constraints remain. These include the limits of Turkey's own capabilities, as well as the foreign and security policy preferences of the Gulf countries themselves.

Commentary

- **Since 2023, Turkey has made a concerted effort to repair and strengthen its relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.** Previously, relations had been strained by a number of disputes. These included tensions between the Gulf states and Qatar – Turkey's closest regional ally and host to Turkish military bases – as well as Ankara's international campaign criticising the Saudi leadership over the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Relations deteriorated to the point that Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed an informal economic boycott on Turkey. The appointment of Hakan Fidan as foreign minister in June 2023 gave fresh momentum to the normalisation process. His diplomatic efforts, supported by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visits to the Gulf states (see '[Erdoğan visits the Gulf States: closer cooperation](#)'), quickly delivered results. In March 2024, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – comprising Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and the UAE – launched negotiations on a free trade agreement. At the same time, investment from Gulf countries in Turkey increased, while cooperation expanded into sectors of growing strategic importance for the Turkish economy, notably the defence and space industries.
- **Ankara views the deteriorating regional security environment around Iran as an opportunity to deepen defence ties with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.** Defence

cooperation has expanded steadily in recent years. Key developments include technology transfer agreements between the Saudi defence company SAMI and Turkish firms Baykar, Aselsan and Roketsan, paving the way for the production of Bayraktar Akinci drones in Saudi Arabia. The UAE has also concluded framework agreements with a number of Turkish defence manufacturers. Turkey is now aiming to build on this momentum. One of its priorities is securing Saudi investment in the Kaan fighter aircraft programme, a key project undertaken by the Turkish defence industry. Ankara is also promoting its 'Steel Dome' concept, an integrated and layered air defence system that combines very short-range (Korkut), short- and medium-range (Hisar) and long-range (Siper) air defence platforms, supported by electronic warfare, counter-drone and laser systems. Turkish officials believe that recent US and Israeli strikes on Iran, along with Iran's retaliatory actions across the region, will encourage Gulf states to further diversify their sources of military equipment. From Ankara's perspective, Turkish defence products are particularly attractive because they offer greater flexibility than many Western alternatives, as well as broader opportunities for technology transfer and joint production.

- **Turkey is set to continue strengthening its relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, particularly through economic cooperation. However, its ambitions in the security sphere are likely to face greater obstacles.** Gulf states remain committed to preserving the US role as the cornerstone of regional security, and this consideration is likely to continue influencing their defence procurement decisions. The United States is also working to maintain its dominant position in the Gulf arms market. According to Turkish media reports, Washington has sought to discourage Saudi interest in the Kaan fighter aircraft programme. As a result, Turkey faces strong competition from established suppliers as it seeks to expand its defence exports to the region. Moreover, even if Gulf states pursue a more diversified approach to defence procurement, Ankara may find it difficult to take full advantage of the opportunity. The main challenge lies in the limited capacity of Turkey's defence industry, which could constrain its ability to meet increased demand from regional partners.