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Beyond Sectarianism: Strategic Autonomy, Religious Identity, and the Future of Gulf Security

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Abstract

Reports suggesting closer diplomatic and economic engagement between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran amid regional tensions have renewed debate about Gulf security, the durability of American influence, and the growing importance of strategic autonomy among middle powers. This article examines the UAE's evolving approach toward Iran and its implications for the future of regional security. The analysis draws on realist theory, regional security complex theory, and strategic autonomy theory to interpret these developments within the changing international order. It argues that the UAE's approach reflects a broader tendency among Gulf states to prioritize pragmatic diplomacy, economic resilience, and regional stability over rigid bloc alignment. The discussion also considers the implications for Africa and the wider Global South, where states navigate multipolarity and shifting centers of influence. The article concludes that American influence remains significant, while Gulf states increasingly exercise independent foreign policy choices that may reshape the Middle Eastern security architecture. By connecting regional diplomatic engagement with strategic autonomy, the analysis contributes to debates on Gulf security and the foreign policy choices of states navigating an evolving multipolar order.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy; UAE–Iran Relations; Gulf Security; Multipolarity; Global South

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Introduction

The Middle East is experiencing one of the most significant geopolitical transformations of the twenty-first century. While military confrontations, economic sanctions, and diplomatic rivalries continue to dominate headlines, a quieter yet equally important development is unfolding beneath the surface: the growing determination of regional states to pursue independent foreign policies shaped primarily by national interests rather than external expectations.

Recent reports of renewed economic and diplomatic engagement between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran have become symbolic of this transformation. Although the extent and details of such engagement remain subject to ongoing political developments, the broader trend is unmistakable. Gulf States are increasingly recalibrating their strategic priorities in response to changing regional realities.

For decades, security in the Gulf rested upon a relatively stable arrangement. Acharya, in his study, "The End of American World Order," noted that the United States acted as the principal external guarantor of regional security, while Gulf States aligned their strategic calculations with broader American objectives. However, he explained that the emerging geopolitical realities—including China's rise, Russia's renewed activism, shifting energy markets, and growing regional confidence—have begun to alter this equation (Acharya 2018).

This article argues that contemporary Gulf diplomacy reflects the emergence of strategic autonomy among regional powers. Rather than abandoning traditional alliances, Gulf States are diversifying partnerships, reducing vulnerabilities, and seeking greater flexibility in managing their security and economic interests.

Although religion has historically shaped political identities and legitimacy in the Gulf; the emerging rapprochement between the UAE and Iran is driven primarily by strategic, economic, and security considerations rather than by religious reconciliation. The unfolding diplomacy illustrates the growing primacy of state interests over sectarian politics within an increasingly multipolar international order.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions concerning Gulf security have traditionally focused on alliance politics, military deterrence, and external intervention. Realism scholars, Morgenthau and Waltz in their respective study argue that international politics is

fundamentally shaped by the pursuit of power and security within an anarchic international system (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979).

Waltz, in his work, "Theory of International Politics," pointed out that states exist in a condition of self-help, meaning that survival ultimately depends upon their own ability to secure national interests. This perspective remains highly relevant in understanding recent diplomatic initiatives within the Gulf.

Complementing realist perspectives, Buzan and Wæver's (2003) in their study, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security," observe that Regional Security Complex Theory emphasizes the significance of geography in shaping security relationships. The theory argues that neighboring states are often more affected by the actions of one another; not by distant powers. Consequently, regional security arrangements tend to emerge from local interactions rather than external interventions alone.

Another important body of literature focuses on strategic autonomy. Smith (2021) defines strategic autonomy as the capacity of states to make independent foreign policy decisions while maintaining diverse international partnerships. This concept has gained prominence as countries across the Global South seek to reduce dependence on any single geopolitical actor.

Meanwhile, in a research "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition," Keohane and Nye's (1977) theory of complex interdependence highlights the growing importance of economic relationships in shaping international behavior. According to this framework, economic cooperation could create incentives for peaceful coexistence even among political rivals.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding contemporary Gulf diplomacy and the evolving relationship between the UAE and Iran.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multi-theoretical approach combining Realism, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Strategic Autonomy Theory.

Realism explains why states prioritize survival and security in an uncertain international environment (Waltz 1979). From this perspective, diplomatic engagement

between regional rivals should be understood primarily as a strategic calculation rather than an ideological transformation.

Regional Security Complex Theory explains why neighboring states cannot ignore one another regardless of political disagreements (Buzan and Wæver 2003). Geography creates enduring security interdependence that often compels cooperation despite rivalry.

Smith in a study, "Strategic Autonomy and International Politics," Strategic Autonomy Theory helps explain the growing tendency among middle powers to diversify partnerships and pursue independent foreign policies (Smith 2021). In an increasingly multipolar world, dependence on a single external actor may create strategic vulnerabilities.

Put together, these frameworks suggest that recent Gulf diplomacy reflects adaptation to structural changes within the international system.

Religion and Foreign Policy in the Gulf: Implications for the Iran–UAE Rapprochement

The relationship between religion and foreign policy has occupied a central place in scholarly discussions of Middle Eastern politics. In the Gulf region, religion is more than a matter of personal faith; it is deeply embedded in state identity, political legitimacy, diplomatic engagement, and regional security. Consequently, analyses of the recent rapprochement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) require an understanding of how religious identities interact with geopolitical calculations. The emerging literature suggests that while religious ideology continues to shape political narratives and public legitimacy, pragmatic national interests increasingly drive foreign policy decisions.

Early studies of Gulf politics were dominated by realist perspectives, which explained inter-state relations through the distribution of power, military capabilities, alliance formation, and economic interests. These approaches portray religion as being secondary to strategic considerations. However, post-Cold War scholarship has challenged this assumption, arguing that religion constitutes an independent variable capable of influencing diplomatic behavior, conflict dynamics, and regional cooperation. Religion shapes leaders' perceptions of legitimacy. It provides moral justification for foreign policy decisions, and influences public support for international engagement.

Iran represents one of the most significant examples of religion's influence on foreign policy. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Constitution has integrated Islamic principles into state governance and foreign relations. The doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) provides both domestic legitimacy and an ideological foundation for Iran's external engagement. Nevertheless, scholars caution that Iran's foreign policy should not be reduced solely to sectarian or religious motivations. Ostovar in his study, "Iran, its clients, and the future of the Middle East: The limits of Religion," argues that although religion remains integral to Iran's political identity, Tehran's state-to-state diplomacy is largely guided by strategic calculations, national security concerns, and geopolitical interests. Sectarian identity becomes more prominent in Iran's relationships with non-state actors than in its bilateral relations with sovereign states (Ostavar 2018).

Similarly, Götsch in "Iran's Foreign Policy: Theological or Pragmatic," maintains that Iranian foreign policy reflects a continuous interaction between ideological commitments and pragmatic national interests. While revolutionary ideals such as support for oppressed Muslim communities remain part of official discourse, Iran has repeatedly demonstrated flexibility when strategic and economic considerations demand diplomatic accommodation. This duality helps explain the country's willingness to pursue improved relations with Gulf Arab states despite longstanding ideological differences (Götsch 2015).

The UAE presents a contrasting but also important case. Unlike Iran, whose political system explicitly incorporates religious authority into governance, the UAE has gradually adopted a pragmatic foreign policy that uses religion primarily as an instrument of soft power rather than ideological mobilization. Roberts in his work, "Mosque and State: The United Arab Emirates' Secular Foreign Policy," argues that the UAE has increasingly pursued what may be described as a largely pragmatic or secular foreign policy by prioritizing economic development, commercial integration, technological advancement, and regional stability over sectarian rivalry (Roberts 2016).

Recent scholarship further demonstrates that the UAE has actively institutionalized religious moderation and interfaith dialogue as components of its international image. Through initiatives promoting tolerance, coexistence, and dialogue among religions, Abu Dhabi has sought to position itself as a bridge between civilizations and an advocate of moderate Islam. Rather than exporting a specific religious ideology, the UAE employs religion as an instrument of diplomatic branding and international legitimacy.

Hoffman develops this argument through the concept of "religious soft power." In his study, “Islam and Statecraft: Religious Soft Power in the Arab Gulf States,” argues that Gulf governments increasingly deploy religious narratives, institutions, and symbols to strengthen political authority, improve international reputation, and advance foreign policy objectives. Religion, therefore, functions alongside economic diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and strategic partnerships rather than replacing traditional instruments of statecraft. The UAE's emphasis on moderation, tolerance, and interfaith engagement illustrates this broader transformation in Gulf diplomacy.

Against this background, the growing rapprochement between Iran and the UAE represents an important departure from earlier patterns of regional rivalry. For decades, bilateral relations were characterized by disputes over the Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands, conflicting positions on regional conflicts, concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program, and broader Sunni–Shi'a tensions. The islands are located in the eastern Persian Gulf near the entrance to the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Beginning in the late 2010s and accelerating after 2021, both countries adopted a policy of cautious diplomatic engagement. Senior-level visits, restored diplomatic contacts, expanded trade, and maritime security cooperation reflected a shared interest in reducing regional tensions.

The literature attributes this rapprochement primarily to changing regional and international circumstances rather than to theological reconciliation. Several factors are identified. These include the uncertainty surrounding long-term American security commitments in the Gulf, the economic costs of prolonged regional confrontation, disruptions to maritime trade, the search for investment opportunities, and the broader movement toward strategic autonomy among Gulf States. The UAE increasingly recognized that stable relations with Iran were compatible with its economic vision and ambitions to serve as a global commercial hub. Iran likewise viewed improved relations with Gulf neighbors as a means of reducing regional isolation and expanding economic opportunities, despite continuing international sanctions.

From the perspective of religion and foreign policy, the Iran–UAE rapprochement demonstrates that religious identity does not necessarily pre-determine interstate behavior. Although Sunni–Shi'a differences remain important components of political discourse and historical memory, both governments have shown considerable willingness to subordinate sectarian narratives to strategic interests. Rather than abandoning their respective religious

identities, both states have refocused religion in ways that facilitate coexistence and diplomatic engagement.

This observation aligns with broader theoretical developments in International Relations that increasingly, reject simplistic sectarian explanations of Middle Eastern politics. Wastnidge (2018) in "Religion and Geopolitics in Iranian Foreign Policy," argues that describing Gulf politics exclusively through Sunni–Shi'a rivalry obscures the complex interaction between ideology, geopolitics, economics, and national security. Religious identity remains important, but it operates within a broader framework of state interests and strategic calculations.

An emerging body of literature also links the rapprochement to the wider transformation of Gulf foreign policy under conditions of multi-polarity. Gulf States are diversifying diplomatic and economic partnerships with China, India, Russia, and other emerging powers while maintaining varying degrees of cooperation with Western allies. This strategic diversification encourages de-escalation among regional rivals because economic integration and investment require a stable security environment. Consequently, religious diplomacy increasingly supports, rather than obstructs, pragmatic regional engagement.

Despite these valuable contributions, significant gaps remain within existing scholarship. Most studies examine religion either as an ideological driver of Iranian foreign policy or as a component of the UAE's soft-power strategy. Comparatively little research analyses how differing religious narratives could become complementary rather than confrontational during periods of diplomatic rapprochement. Likewise, relatively few studies investigate how religious institutions, interfaith initiatives, and Islamic diplomatic traditions contribute to confidence-building between rival Gulf States.

Therefore, the evolving Iran–UAE relationship presents an important opportunity to reassess conventional assumptions regarding religion and international politics in the Gulf. Rather than viewing religion solely as a source of conflict, contemporary developments suggest that religious legitimacy, moderation, and interfaith engagement can coexist with pragmatic diplomacy and strategic cooperation. Understanding this interaction is essential for explaining the emergence of a more flexible and multipolar Gulf regional order, in which strategic autonomy increasingly outweighs ideological confrontation while

religion continues to provide an important source of political legitimacy and diplomatic influence.

Strategic Autonomy and the UAE's Foreign Policy Evolution

The UAE's foreign policy has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Once viewed primarily as a beneficiary of Western security guarantees, the country has emerged as an increasingly influential regional actor pursuing multidimensional partnerships.

The UAE maintains close strategic ties with the United States while simultaneously expanding economic engagement with China, India, Africa, and various regional actors. This diversified approach reflects a broader commitment to strategic flexibility.

Smith (2021) argues that middle powers increasingly seek autonomy through partnership diversification rather than alliance abandonment. The UAE's contemporary diplomacy exemplifies this trend.

Rather than choosing between competing global powers, the country seeks constructive engagement with multiple actors simultaneously. Such a strategy enhances resilience and reduces vulnerability to geopolitical shocks.

The growing emphasis on dialogue with regional neighbors, including Iran, could therefore be understood as part of a larger strategy designed to maximize stability and protect long-term national interests.

Geography and the Logic of Regional Engagement

One of the most enduring realities of Gulf politics is geography. Governments change. Alliances evolve. Global power shifts. Geography remains constant.

Regional Security Complex Theory argues that neighboring states inevitably affect one another's security calculations (Buzan and Wæver 2003). This principle is particularly relevant in the Gulf, where states share maritime routes, energy infrastructure, environmental concerns, and economic networks.

Iran occupies a strategically significant position in the region. Its population size, military capabilities, energy resources, and geographic location make it impossible to ignore.

Consequently, Gulf States must continually balance deterrence with engagement.

Even during periods of heightened political tension, economic and social interactions often continue. This reality demonstrates the limitations of simplistic narratives that portray states as either permanent allies or permanent adversaries.

The practical necessities of geography frequently encourage dialogue even when political disagreements remain unresolved.

The Limits of External Security Guarantees

For much of the post-Cold War era, American military power formed the foundation of Gulf security architecture.

The United States established military bases throughout the region, maintained extensive defense partnerships, and projected significant naval power across strategic waterways.

However, recent developments have prompted regional actors to reconsider the limitations of external security guarantees.

Realist theory suggests that no state can permanently outsource its security responsibilities (Waltz 1979). While alliances remain valuable, they cannot eliminate uncertainty.

Regional governments ultimately bear the consequences of instability, including economic disruptions, investment uncertainty, and security challenges.

As a result, Gulf States increasingly seek supplementary mechanisms for conflict management and regional stability.

Diplomatic engagement with neighboring countries represents one such mechanism.

This trend does not necessarily indicate declining confidence in existing alliances. Rather, it reflects recognition that regional security challenges require regional solutions.

Economic Interdependence and Pragmatic Diplomacy

Modern security extends beyond military considerations. Economic stability has become a central component of national security.

The UAE's remarkable development model depends heavily on investor confidence, international trade, tourism, logistics, and financial services. Regional instability threatens these foundations.

Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that economic interdependence could reduce incentives for conflict by increasing the costs associated with confrontation.

This framework helps explain why countries with political differences often maintain economic relationships.

Economic cooperation creates mutual interests that encourage communication and restraint.

The growing emphasis on commercial engagement throughout the Gulf reflects recognition that prosperity and stability are inseparable.

Consequently, diplomacy increasingly functions not only as a political instrument but also as an economic necessity.

Multi-polarity and the Transformation of Global Order

The broader context for these developments is the emergence of a multipolar international system.

According to Acharya (2018), the contemporary world is witnessing the gradual diffusion of power away from traditional centers of influence.

China's economic rise, India's growing global role, Russia's strategic activism, and the increasing confidence of regional powers have contributed to a more complex geopolitical landscape.

Zakaria (2008) in his study, “The Post-American World,” describes this phenomenon as the emergence of a "post-American world," characterized not by American collapse but by the rise of other influential actors.

In this environment, states possess greater opportunities to diversify partnerships and pursue independent policies.

The UAE's diplomacy reflects adaptation to these changing realities.

Rather than relying exclusively upon a single external partner, the country increasingly engages with multiple centers of power.

This approach enhances strategic flexibility and reduces dependence.

Religious Impact on Emerging Gulf Diplomacy

The evolving diplomatic engagement between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran raises an important question regarding the place of religion in contemporary Gulf politics. Although strategic autonomy, national security, and economic interests appear to be the principal drivers of recent rapprochement, religion continues to influence the political environment within which diplomacy is conducted. Rather than acting as the primary determinant of inter-state relations, religious identity now functions as an important contextual factor that shapes public perceptions, elite discourse, and the broader social legitimacy of foreign policy decisions.

Historically, sectarian narratives have contributed significantly to political tensions in the Gulf. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, ideological competition between revolutionary Shi'a Iran and many Sunni-led Arab states has influenced regional alignments, media narratives, and security perceptions. Religious symbolism has often been intertwined with geopolitical rivalry, making it difficult to distinguish theological disagreements from political competition. However, recent diplomatic initiatives suggest that Gulf governments are increasingly recognizing the limitations of sectarian polarization in addressing contemporary security and development challenges.

Implications of the Emerging Rapprochement

i) One of the most significant religious implications of the emerging rapprochement is the gradual reduction of sectarian rhetoric in official discourse. Although theological differences remain, political leaders have become increasingly cautious about employing inflammatory religious language that could intensify regional tensions. This shift contributes to a more conducive atmosphere for diplomacy and confidence-building; reducing the likelihood that political disputes will escalate into broader sectarian confrontations. The moderation of official rhetoric also sends an important signal to religious communities that peaceful coexistence and dialogue are compatible with Islamic values.

ii) A second positive development is the potential for greater Muslim solidarity on issues of common concern. The Muslim world continues to face numerous humanitarian challenges, including armed conflicts, forced displacement, food insecurity, poverty, climate-related disasters, and public health emergencies. Improved relations between

influential regional actors may create opportunities for coordinated humanitarian initiatives through multilateral organizations and charitable institutions. Cooperation in areas such as disaster relief, refugee assistance, public health, and poverty alleviation could strengthen the collective capacity of Muslim-majority states to address shared challenges while reinforcing the ethical principles of compassion (raḥmah), justice (ʿadl), and human solidarity emphasized in Islamic teachings.

iii) The normalization of diplomatic relations may also encourage greater engagement between Sunni and Shi'a religious institutions. Academic exchanges, scholarly conferences, inter-sect dialogue, and collaborative research on shared aspects of Islamic civilization could contribute to reducing long-standing misunderstandings. Given that doctrinal differences are unlikely to disappear, sustained engagement among scholars and religious leaders may help distinguish legitimate theological diversity from politically motivated sectarian hostility. Such initiatives would not necessarily seek doctrinal uniformity but could promote mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and a renewed emphasis on the common foundations of the Islamic faith.

iv) Another area where improved diplomatic relations may have tangible religious benefits is in facilitating pilgrimage, religious tourism, educational exchange, and cultural interaction. Enhanced diplomatic cooperation could improve travel arrangements, expand opportunities for students and scholars, encourage cultural diplomacy, and strengthen people-to-people contacts across the Muslim world. These exchanges have the potential to foster greater understanding among diverse Muslim communities while reducing stereotypes that have been reinforced through prolonged political tensions. Over time, increased social interaction may complement official diplomacy by building trust at the societal level.

v) Despite these positive prospects, significant challenges remain. Religious reconciliation should not be assumed to follow automatically from political rapprochement. Hard-line religious movements and ideological actors who derive influence from sectarian polarization may resist efforts toward normalization. Such groups may portray diplomatic engagement as a compromise of religious principles or as a betrayal of long-standing political commitments. Their opposition could complicate efforts by governments to institutionalize cooperation and may continue to influence public opinion in certain segments of society.

vi) Proxy actors operating in various regional conflict zones may continue to employ sectarian narratives to mobilize support and justify violence. Conflicts in parts of the Middle East have demonstrated that religious identity could be used by both state and non-state actors pursuing political, military, or ideological objectives. Consequently, improvements in bilateral diplomatic relations do not necessarily eliminate the broader regional dynamics that have sustained sectarian competition over several decades.

vii) It is also important to recognize that religious mistrust accumulated over many years cannot be erased through diplomatic agreements alone. Historical grievances, competing narratives, political memories, and social perceptions often persist long after formal relations improve. Building genuine confidence requires sustained engagement among governments, religious scholars, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and local communities. Confidence-building measures, dialogue initiatives, and educational programs promoting mutual understanding will therefore remain essential components of any durable reconciliation process.

From the perspective of international relations theory, these developments reinforce the argument that religion remains an influential—but not decisive—factor in contemporary Gulf diplomacy. Realist Theory suggests that states prioritize survival, security, and national interests, while Strategic Autonomy Theory emphasizes flexibility and diversified partnerships in an increasingly multipolar world. Religion, in this context, shapes the environment within which foreign policy is implemented rather than determining its direction. The current rapprochement between the UAE and Iran therefore reflects a convergence of strategic interests while simultaneously creating opportunities for more constructive religious engagement.

Ultimately, the religious impact of emerging Gulf diplomacy should be understood as both enabling and constraining. Reduced sectarian rhetoric, expanded humanitarian cooperation, strengthened inter-sect dialogue, and increased religious and cultural exchanges have the potential to contribute positively to regional stability. At the same time, entrenched ideological divisions, the activities of proxy actors, and the persistence of historical mistrust underscore that reconciliation is likely to be gradual rather than immediate. The Gulf experience demonstrates that while diplomacy may open the door to religious understanding, lasting peace depends upon sustained political commitment, responsible religious leadership, and the willingness of societies to move beyond the

legacies of sectarian polarization. This nuanced reality offers valuable lessons for other multi-religious societies, particularly in Africa and the wider Global South, where managing religious diversity remains an essential component of peacebuilding and national development.

Lessons for Africa and the Global South

The implications of these developments extend beyond the Middle East to countries across Africa and the wider Global South that are being confronted with similar challenges regarding development, security, and geopolitical competition.

What are the lessons that the multi-religious societies in Africa stand to learn from the Gulf experience?

i) Strategic autonomy requires diversification.

Countries that cultivate multiple partnerships often possess greater flexibility during periods of uncertainty.

ii) Regional challenges frequently require regional solutions.

External support remains important, but sustainable peace often depends upon local ownership and cooperation.

iii) Economic development and security are deeply interconnected.

Investment, trade, and prosperity contribute significantly to long-term stability.

iv) Finally, pragmatic diplomacy often produces more durable outcomes than rigid ideological alignments.

African governments increasingly operate within a multipolar environment that provides opportunities for greater strategic agency.

The major challenge therefore, is to utilize these opportunities effectively while safeguarding national interests.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology based on documentary analysis and theoretical interpretation. The study draws upon existing scholarly literature in international relations, security studies, Middle Eastern politics, and

Global South diplomacy. Academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and contemporary geopolitical analyses constitute the primary sources of data.

The research employs an interpretive approach rather than a quantitative. The objective is not to measure military capabilities or economic indicators statistically but to examine the strategic logic underlying emerging diplomatic behavior in the Gulf region. Specifically, the article analyzes recent reports of diplomatic and economic engagement between the UAE and Iran within the broader context of changing regional and global power dynamics.

The study is informed by three complementary theoretical frameworks: Realism, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Strategic Autonomy Theory. These frameworks provide analytical tools for understanding how states respond to perceived threats, manage regional relationships, and adapt to evolving international structures.

The choice of a qualitative methodology is considered appropriate in this study because contemporary geopolitical developments often involve complex interactions among historical experiences, security perceptions, economic interests, and political calculations that cannot be adequately explained through numerical indicators alone (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Rather than assessing the accuracy of individual media reports concerning UAE-Iran relations, this study focuses on what such developments reveal about broader trends in regional diplomacy and international politics.

Historical Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy

To appreciate the significance of contemporary UAE diplomacy, it is necessary to understand the historical trajectory of its foreign policy.

Since its establishment in 1971, the UAE has pursued a pragmatic approach to international relations. Located in one of the world's most strategically sensitive regions, the federation has consistently sought to balance security concerns with economic ambitions.

Gause in his study, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," observed that during the early period of state formation, UAE foreign policy focused primarily on state-building, economic development, and regional stability. He contended

that the discovery and exportation of oil provided substantial resources for modernization, while close relations with Western powers offered security assurances.

According to him, the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War significantly strengthened the American security presence throughout the Gulf region. Like many neighboring states, the UAE viewed American military protection as an essential component of regional stability (Gause 2014).

However, the twenty-first century introduced new realities. The 2003 invasion of Iraq fundamentally altered regional power balances. The Arab Spring of 2011 generated widespread uncertainty across the Middle East. Simultaneously, globalization expanded economic opportunities far beyond traditional Western partnerships. As a result, UAE policymakers increasingly recognized the importance of diversification.

The federation began investing heavily in Asia, Africa, and emerging markets. Diplomatic outreach expanded. Economic partnerships multiplied.

This transformation reflected a broader strategic calculation: long-term security required economic resilience, which in turn, required global connectivity.

The UAE's contemporary foreign policy therefore combines traditional security partnerships with increasingly diversified diplomatic and economic engagements.

Iran and the Politics of Regional Resilience

Any serious discussion of Gulf security must address the role of Iran. This is because; few states in the contemporary Middle East possess Iran's combination of historical influence, demographic size, geographic reach, and strategic importance.

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, relations between Iran and many Gulf states have fluctuated between cooperation and competition. Political tensions, ideological differences, and security concerns have frequently shaped interactions. Nevertheless, Iran has remained a central actor in regional politics.

From a realist perspective, Walt, in "The Origins of Alliances," argues that Iran's enduring influence demonstrates the importance of structural factors in international relations. Despite sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and recurring economic pressures, the country has maintained significant regional relevance (Walt 1987).

This resilience reflects certain factors:

i) Iran's geographic position grants it influence over critical maritime routes, including the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant proportion of global energy supplies pass.

ii) Iran possesses substantial demographic and industrial capacities relative to many neighboring states.

iii) Decades of external pressure encouraged the development of domestic capabilities and alternative international partnerships.

In view of these, regional actors increasingly recognize that sustainable security arrangements must account for Iran's presence rather than assume its marginalization.

This recognition helps explain the growing interest in dialogue and engagement as catalysts for enduring cooperation in the region.

The Strategic Logic Behind Gulf Reconciliation

Recent years have witnessed a noticeable trend toward diplomatic de-escalation throughout the Gulf.

The restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 represented one of the most significant developments in regional politics during the past decade. The agreement demonstrated that longstanding rivals could identify common interests despite their deep fundamental disagreements.

Scholars of conflict resolution such as Zartman in a study, "Cowardly Lions: Missed Opportunities to Prevent Deadly Conflict and State Collapse," have long argued that sustained hostility imposes substantial costs on all parties involved (Zartman 2005).

Economic losses, political instability, and security uncertainties often create incentives for negotiation.

This dynamic appears increasingly evident in the Gulf. Countries throughout the region are pursuing ambitious development agendas requiring stable investment environments, technological innovation, and economic diversification.

Vision-based development programs, infrastructure projects, and technological initiatives all depend upon predictable security conditions. As a result, diplomacy is increasingly viewed as an instrument of development. And the logic is straightforward:

i) Peace encourages investment.

ii) Investment promotes growth.

iii) Growth strengthens stability.

iv) Stability enhances security.

This cycle of logic creates strong and enduring incentives for cooperation; even among traditional rivals.

Religion and Sectarian Identity

Religion has long occupied a central place in the politics and diplomacy of the Middle East. Beyond its theological significance, Islam has historically served as a source of political legitimacy, social identity, and regional influence. Since the establishment of the modern Gulf States and particularly, following the trends between the Islamic Republic of Iran and several Arab Gulf monarchies, the relationships between these countries have often been interpreted through the spectrum of sectarian rivalry. Iran's revolutionary ideology, premised on the concept of Wilāyat al-Faqīh (Guardianship of the Jurist), is in sharp contrast with the predominantly monarchical Sunni political establishments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This gave rise to the many regional disputes framed as manifestations of a broader Sunni-Shi'a contest for influence and legitimacy.

This sectarian narrative has undoubtedly influenced regional perceptions. Political leaders, religious institutions, and non-state actors have at various times employed religious language to mobilize domestic constituencies, justify foreign policy positions, and reinforce political legitimacy. Conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen have frequently been portrayed as extensions of sectarian competition, while media narratives have often reinforced the impression of an irreconcilable religious divide across the Middle East. Such portrayals, however, risk oversimplification of the complex interplay between religion, nationalism, security, and geopolitical interests.

Contemporary scholarship have cautioned against reducing Gulf politics to sectarian explanations alone. Scholars argue that several conflicts commonly described as sectarian are fundamentally caused by contests over power, influence, regime security, and regional order; they are not exclusively theological disputes. Acknowledging the significance of sectarian identities, scholars emphasize that state behavior is ultimately shaped by strategic calculations within an evolving geopolitical environment. In this

respect, religious identity often functions as a political resource that governments and non-state actors selectively employ to advance broader national or ideological objectives.

The evolving relationship between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran illustrates the limitations of interpreting contemporary Gulf diplomacy principally through sectarian lens. Despite enduring theological differences and unresolved political disagreements, both countries are not oblivious of the imperatives of sustained engagement. Geography, economic interdependence, maritime security, energy markets, and regional stability create shared interests that could not be easily ignored. These structural realities encourage dialogue in the damning face ideological differences.

The UAE's contemporary foreign policy reflects a pragmatic approach to regional affairs while simultaneously; it maintains close strategic relations with the United States and other Western partners. It has also expanded diplomatic and economic engagement with China, India, Russia, African states, Israel, and Iran. Such diversification is not driven by religious affinity but by the pursuit of strategic autonomy, economic resilience, and long-term national development. The UAE's willingness to maintain productive relations with states representing diverse political systems, ideological orientations, and religious traditions demonstrates that modern foreign policy is being guided by national interest rather than sectarian alignment.

Similarly, Iran's engagement with Gulf neighbors reflects strategic adaptation to changing regional and international circumstances. Decades of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and geopolitical competition have reinforced Tehran's interest in reducing regional tensions where possible, improving economic connectivity, and expanding diplomatic channels. However, there are profound disagreements regarding regional security issues, intensified dialogue serves as a mechanism for managing competition rather than eliminating it. This shift reflects a broader recognition that prolonged confrontation imposes significant economic, political, and security costs on all parties.

From the perspective of Realist Theory, these developments are not surprising. States operate within an international system characterized by uncertainty and therefore the need to prioritize survival, security, and national interests above ideological or religious considerations (Waltz 1979). Religion may shape domestic legitimacy and public discourse, but foreign policy decisions are ultimately constrained by material realities such as geography, economic dependence, military balance, and strategic necessity.

Furthermore, Regional Security Complex Theory reinforces this interpretation by emphasizing that neighboring states remain bound together by enduring patterns of security interdependence; regardless of ideological differences (Buzan and Wæver 2003). Consequently, diplomacy between Iran and the UAE should be understood less as religious reconciliation than as a rational response to shared regional challenges.

This does not imply that religion has become irrelevant in Gulf politics. Religious identity continues to influence public opinion, political narratives, and the symbolic dimensions of statecraft. Religious institutions remain important sources of soft power, while sectarian identities continue to shape aspects of regional competition and proxy conflicts. Nevertheless, the current progression of Gulf diplomacy suggests that religion increasingly operates as a variable resource among several others, but it is certainly not overriding determinant of interstate relations. Economic modernization, technological transformation, investment security, climate resilience, and regional development now occupy a more prominent place in the strategic calculations of Gulf governments.

The emerging pattern of engagement between the UAE and Iran therefore reflects a gradual transition from ideology-centered rivalry toward interest-driven diplomacy. Rather than signaling the disappearance of religious differences, this evolution demonstrates the growing capacity of states to pigeonhole theological disagreements while cooperating in areas of mutual benefit. Such pragmatism is consistent with the broader emergence of a multipolar international order in which middle powers seek flexibility, diversify partnerships, and prioritize strategic autonomy over rigid geopolitical or sectarian alignments.

For the wider Global South, particularly multi-religious societies such as Nigeria, the Gulf experience offers an instructive lesson. Religious diversity need not preclude constructive diplomacy or regional cooperation. Given that theological differences may shape identities and societal discourse, effective foreign policy requires governments to distinguish between matters of faith and matters of state. Sustainable peace and regional stability are more likely to emerge when diplomacy is guided by shared interests, economic cooperation, and mutual respect; than exploiting religious differences. In this sense, the evolving UAE-Iran relationship illustrates not the triumph of one religious tradition over another, but the increasing primacy of strategic pragmatism in contemporary international relations.

American Influence: Transformation Rather than Decline

One of the most common interpretations of recent Gulf diplomacy is that, it reflects declining American influence. But such conclusions may however, oversimplify a more complex reality.

The United States remains the world's most powerful military actor. Its alliances, technological advantages, financial institutions, and global networks continue to shape international affairs.

However, scholars distinguish between power and control (Nye 2011) as powerful state might possess substantial influence without being able to determine every outcome.

Contemporary Gulf diplomacy illustrates this distinction as it is evident that regional governments continue to value relations with Washington with their rising exercise of independent judgment regarding their own interests.

This behavior reflects changing international circumstances and not outright rejection of American partnerships. Zakaria (2008) argues that the contemporary world is characterized less by American decline than by the rise of others.

China's economic expansion, India's growing influence, and the emergence of regional middle powers have created a more competitive international environment. To this end, states possess greater diplomatic options than in previous decades as the UAE's diversified foreign policy reflects adaptation to this new reality.

Multi-polarity and the Future of International Relations

The concept of multi-polarity occupies a central place in contemporary international relations scholarship. Mearsheimer in his work, "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," defines multi-polarity as a distribution of power in which several influential actors shape international outcomes rather than a single dominant state (Mearsheimer 2001).

Many analysts argue that the international system is moving gradually toward such an arrangement. For instance, China's economic rise has transformed global trade patterns. Also, India's growing population and technological development are enhancing its international influence. Regional organizations are poised to be playing important roles in governance and conflict management while middle powers are asserting greater autonomy.

These developments have significant implications for foreign policy. States operating within a multipolar environment often pursue diversified strategies rather than exclusive alignments.

Flexibility becomes more valuable than dependence and strategic autonomy becomes more feasible. The UAE's diplomatic engagement across multiple regions and political systems reflects this emerging reality. Far from choosing between competing power centers, the country dynamically seeks productive relationships with all major actors.

The UAE approach is most likely to be the model for international diplomacy during the coming decades.

Implications for Africa's Emerging Foreign Policy Doctrine

Perhaps the most important lesson for Africa is about the growing relevance of strategic autonomy.

African countries today operate within a rapidly changing international environment where competition among major powers has increased interest in African markets, resources, infrastructure, and geopolitical partnerships.

This environment presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, greater competition among external actors provides African governments with more choices while on the other, navigating these relationships requires strategic sophistication.

The Gulf experience demonstrates that smaller and middle powers could enhance their influence through diversification, pragmatism, and long-term planning. Against this backdrop, African states need not view international relations as a choice between mutually exclusive partnerships. Instead, they could pursue multidimensional engagement based upon national priorities.

The success of initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area further illustrates the importance of regional cooperation in enhancing strategic autonomy. Thus, as the global order becomes increasingly multipolar, Africa's collective voice may become more influential than at any previous period in modern history.

Lessons for Nigeria and Other Multi-Religious African States: A Comparative African Perspective

The evolving diplomatic relationship between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran offers important lessons for Nigeria and other multi-religious African states. Although the historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts differ, both regions share a common challenge: managing religious diversity while pursuing national security, economic development, and political stability. The Gulf experience demonstrates that deeply rooted religious and ideological differences should not become permanent obstacles to diplomatic engagement or regional cooperation.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, provides a particularly relevant comparative case. With its Muslim 52%-56% and Christian 43%-48% populations (Pew Research Center 2025) and its rich ethnic diversity, religion occupies a prominent place in public life and political discourse. Religious identity has often intersected with ethnicity, regional politics, electoral competition, and security challenges; sometimes contributing to social polarization and violent conflicts. Insurgency, farmer-herder disputes, communal violence, and misinformation have, on several occasions, been interpreted through religious lenses even when their underlying causes include governance deficits, economic inequality, and competition over resources, and criminality. This experience illustrates that, as in the Gulf, religious identity frequently interacts with broader political and socio-economic dynamics rather than acting as the sole driver of conflict hence the significance of these lessons.

i) One important lesson from the UAE-Iran rapprochement is the distinction between theological differences and national interests. States could maintain their respective religious identities and ideological convictions while simultaneously engaging in constructive diplomacy based on mutual interests. For African governments, this suggests that foreign policy should be guided primarily by national development objectives, regional stability, and economic cooperation; not religious affinity or sectarian considerations. Diplomatic engagement with countries of different religious or ideological orientations should not be viewed as a compromise of national values but as a pragmatic means of advancing national interests within an increasingly interconnected international system.

ii) A second lesson concerns the importance of strategic autonomy. Much like the Gulf States, African countries operate in a rapidly changing global environment characterized by increasing competition among major powers. The growing presence of China, India, Türkiye, the European Union, the United States, the Gulf States, and other emerging actors across Africa provides opportunities for diversified partnerships. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single external power, African states could enhance their bargaining capacity by pursuing balanced and multi-dimensional foreign policies anchored on national priorities. Such an approach reduces dependency as it expands opportunities for trade, investment, technology transfer, and infrastructure development.

iii) The Gulf experience also brought in its wake, the value of regional solutions to regional challenges. The gradual normalization of relations between former rivals reflects recognition that enduring security cannot be achieved solely through external military guarantees. In the same vein, African institutions including the regional economic communities and sub-regional security mechanisms have a critical role to play in conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding. Therefore, strengthening these institutions could help African states develop sustainable responses to transnational threats such as terrorism, violent extremism, organized crime, irregular migration, and climate-related insecurity. Regional ownership of security initiatives invariably enhances legitimacy and long-term effectiveness.

iv) Another significant lesson is harped on the relationship between economic development and peace. The UAE's emphasis on economic diversification, global connectivity, and investment security illustrates how prosperity could reinforce stability. African governments pursuing ambitious developmental agenda in various fields may similarly have to recognize that sustained economic growth depends upon a predictable security environment and constructive regional relations. Diplomatic engagement should therefore be viewed not merely as an instrument of foreign policy but also, as a catalyst for investment, employment, innovation, and social development.

v) The role of religious leaders and interfaith institutions also deserves careful consideration. Unlike states that pursue national interests, faith communities often possess considerable moral authority and grassroots influence. In countries such as Nigeria, religious leaders could contribute significantly to conflict prevention by

discouraging hate speech, promoting mutual understanding, and emphasizing shared ethical values such as justice, compassion, and human dignity. Interfaith dialogue should therefore complement, rather than substitute for, state diplomacy. As governments negotiate political agreements, religious institutions could help cultivate the necessary social trust for lasting peace and national cohesion.

vi) Finally, the Gulf experience demonstrates that pragmatism need not imply the abandonment of principles. The UAE and Iran continue to differ on several regional and security issues, yet both have shown a willingness to maintain channels of communication where mutual interests converge. This offers an important lesson for African policymakers confronting domestic and regional disputes. Constructive engagement does not require complete agreement; it requires recognition that concerted dialogue, confidence-building measures, and strengthened cooperation produce durable and mutually beneficial outcomes than prolonged confrontation or zero-sum politics.

In an emerging multi-polar international order, Nigeria and other African states possess greater opportunities to exercise strategic agency than at any previous period in the post-Cold War era. By balancing external partnerships, strengthening regional institutions, promoting interfaith understanding, and placing national development above sectarian or ideological divisions, African governments would be able to pursue foreign and domestic policies that are both principled and pragmatic. The evolving diplomacy between the UAE and Iran thus offers not a model to be replicated uncritically, but a valuable case study illustrating how states could manage religious diversity, sectarian dogma, geopolitical competition, and regional security through strategic autonomy and sustained dialogue. Such lessons are particularly relevant for the Global South as it presents a navigational buoy in the wide ocean of an increasingly complex and multipolar international political system.

Conclusion

The evolving diplomatic landscape of the Gulf provides valuable insights into the transformation of contemporary international politics.

Viewed through the lenses of Realism, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Strategic Autonomy Theory, recent UAE-Iran engagement reflects broader structural changes rather than isolated diplomatic events.

States increasingly prioritize flexibility, economic resilience, and regional stability. The traditional assumption that security depends exclusively upon external guarantees is gradually giving way to a more layered understanding that emphasizes regional cooperation and diversified partnerships.

For the UAE, engagement with regional actors represents an effort to navigate uncertainty while preserving economic prosperity and national security.

For Iran, such engagement reduces isolation and offers opportunities for regional integration.

For the United States, these developments illustrate the challenges and opportunities associated with a more multipolar world. It ends unipolar dictatorship.

The evolving relationship between the UAE and Iran demonstrates that while religious identities continue to influence regional perceptions and domestic legitimacy; contemporary Gulf diplomacy is increasingly shaped by strategic autonomy, economic interdependence, and regional security considerations. Religion remains an important contextual variable, but it no longer fully explains state behavior. The emerging Middle East reflects a transition from ideology-driven rivalry toward interest-driven engagement, offering valuable lessons for Africa and the wider Global South as they contends with an increasingly multipolar international order.

The future international system is unlikely to be dominated by a single power. Instead, it will be characterized by multiple centers of influence, expanding diplomatic options, and growing opportunities for strategic autonomy.

The countries most likely to succeed in this environment would be those capable of balancing relationships, adapting to change, and pursuing national interests through pragmatic and forward-looking diplomacy.

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