The Gulf Cooperation Council Explained

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Introduction:

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched a wave of airstrikes against Iran, triggering a rapid escalation toward a full-scale regional war. Preceding the attacks, some countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) concentrated their diplomatic efforts on pressuring Washington to refrain from using force. The GCC was formed in 1981, comprising of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, in order to enhance their cooperation across economic, security, and political sectors. This article examines the GCC and its structural organisation, its main policy domains, and the structural limitations that constrain its effectiveness.

Main Body:

The GCC was established following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1980 Iraqi invasion. Due to this growing regional insecurity, their shared

geographic region with common frontiers, religious, linguistic, and historical ties, similar political systems, and oil-dependent economies, its member states decided to enhance their collective security and establish the GCC.

The primary objective of the GCC's economic cooperation is to diversify away from oil dependency, pool industrial development, and present itself as a unified voice in trade negotiations. For instance, it used a unified external tariff position to leverage bargaining power with the European Economic Community. Despite security not being explicitly mentioned in its Charter, the Council turned it into a main objective. It encompasses counterterrorism efforts, border security, passport standardisation, and drug trafficking, and initiatives such as deploying the "Peninsula Shield Force" to Bahrain to help suppress protests following the Arab Spring. Regarding foreign policy coordination, the Gulf states' security has always relied on American military presence in the region, highlighting their structural defence dependency despite prioritising a balanced diplomatic approach. This is reflected in GCC's response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when the member states universally condemned the act, yet invited the US-led coalition to use their territories for military operations.

Limitations and Tensions:

GCC member states vary enormously in size, population, and wealth. For example, Saudi Arabia's territory is over 3,000 times larger than Bahrain's. The Council also has no binding legal enforcement mechanism, directly evident in the stalemate around the comprehensive security agreement and the single currency project. Lastly, the GCC is internally fragmented, exemplified by the Qatar blockade from 2017 to 2021.

Conclusion:

Though the GCC is a consensus-based intergovernmental organisation aiming to coordinate on economy, security, and foreign policy, it is hindered by structural and systemic vulnerabilities as demonstrated by its reaction towards the Israeli and US attacks against Iran. Nevertheless, understanding its institutional architecture is crucial to unpack the recent geopolitical turmoil in the region.

Further reading to consult:

Ulrichsen, K. C. (2024). *GCC struggles: Internal rivalries, fragmentation and lost opportunities.* Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/gcc-struggles-internal-rivalries-fragmentation-and-lost-opportunities-187279