

GEOPOLITICS AND ENERGY SECURITY IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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Abstract

This article examines the geopolitical dynamics and energy security challenges of the Persian Gulf, with a focus on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. It highlights the region's strategic significance as a major global energy hub, emphasizing the concentration of oil and gas reserves in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, Kuwait, and other Gulf states. The study analyzes both internal factors, such as Iran's nuclear program, instability in Iraq, sectarian tensions, and finite hydrocarbon resources, and external factors, including global energy demand, competition among major powers, and the geopolitical influence of energy-exporting states. The article underscores the pivotal role of Saudi Arabia in maintaining regional stability, shaping OPEC policy, and balancing energy relations with other Arab states. Finally, it demonstrates that the Persian Gulf's energy security is not only an economic issue but also a critical determinant of regional stability and global geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords

Persian Gulf, GCC, energy security, hydrocarbon resources, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, OPEC, regional stability, global energy markets, geopolitical influence

Introduction

The socio-economic development of sovereign states increasingly depends on their capacity to implement forward looking projects and initiatives capable of addressing contemporary security challenges. In the context of the globalization of national interests, states are compelled to pursue coherent geopolitical strategies in order to secure and consolidate their positions within the international system. Failure to do so exposes them to the influence of external political ambitions and strategic pressures exerted by other actors. In recent decades, the security of energy resources, the development of energy infrastructure, and the establishment of integrated energy systems have emerged as central determinants of foreign policy strategies across a wide range of states. This tendency is particularly evident in the Persian Gulf region, where evolving perceptions of energy security have significantly reshaped regional security dynamics. As a consequence, oil and gas policy, which has traditionally occupied a central place in the strategic priorities of Gulf states, has become increasingly centralized and reoriented, reflecting its growing significance not only as an economic foundation but also as a key instrument of geopolitical influence and regional stability.

Literature and Sources Review

The study of the Persian Gulf's geopolitical dynamics and energy security draws on a wide array of scholarly works, official reports, and statistical data sources. The analysis integrates contributions from political scientists, energy economists, and regional experts, providing a comprehensive understanding of both internal and external factors influencing the Gulf region.

Among the world's leading oil-exporting regions, the Persian Gulf occupies a uniquely strategic position in the global energy system. As of 2025, key Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait rank among the world's largest holders of proven crude oil reserves. Saudi Arabia possesses approximately 267 billion barrels of proven oil

reserves, Iraq around 145 billion barrels, the United Arab Emirates about 113 billion barrels, and Kuwait roughly 101 billion barrels, collectively accounting for nearly half of global oil reserves [2].

This concentration firmly positions the Persian Gulf as a cornerstone of global energy security. In addition, the region plays a critical role in natural gas markets, with Gulf countries, most notably Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia holding substantial portions of the world's proven gas reserves [3]. This concentration of hydrocarbon resources reinforces the region's long-term strategic and geopolitical relevance, both as an economic foundation and as a tool of geopolitical influence.

When reflecting on the role and significance of the Arab world in the global political landscape, political scientist and orientalist Z.Munavvarov highlights several key points:

- Despite notable political, economic, and socio-cultural differences, as well as internal conflicts and tensions, there exist 21 countries that identify themselves as Arab states, which underscores a shared regional identity.
- The Arab states are located in a strategically vital geographic region that connects three major continents – Asia, Africa, and Europe—through critical corridors such as the Mediterranean Sea and Turkey, placing them at the nexus of global communications and trade routes.
- The region's abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas reserves –the principal drivers of contemporary economic development – reinforce its centrality in the global economy.

The presence of the Islamic world's most revered religious sites, Mecca and Medina, within the Arab domain has established the region as a religious, spiritual, and, to a certain extent, ideological and cultural center for Muslim populations worldwide [9].

Moreover, the Arab world's control over a significant portion of the world's energy resources underscores its critical role in maintaining global political and economic stability. The unity of Arab states demonstrates their capacity to exert substantial influence on the international stage, particularly in the energy sector. This influence was most prominently displayed during the 1973-1974 "energy crisis", when, in response to Western support for Israel during the October War (1973), OPEC member states halted oil exports to the global market, triggering a dramatic impact on international oil supplies and prices. Thus, it is evident that the Arab world's capacity to exert political and economic influence continues to generate challenges for the pursuit of national interests by several major states in the contemporary international system.

It should be emphasized that in the contemporary era, no state can independently meet all of its energy needs and capacities. This is particularly evident at a time when energy scarcity and security are recognized as global challenges, and the degree of energy interdependence among regions and states has significantly increased. Consequently, energy policy has become a central priority in the foreign policy agendas of numerous countries, especially major global powers. This phenomenon can be explained by several factors, including the need of actors in the global energy market to ensure their own energy security, the pursuit of profitable business interests in the energy sector, and the extraction, processing, and transportation of oil and gas resources, among others.

It should be noted that in the contemporary world, energy has emerged not only as a key driver of global economic dynamics but also as a primary factor shaping the broader system of international relations. Against this backdrop, analyzing the prospects and opportunities of the modern oil and gas policies of the Persian Gulf Arab states, as well as their influence on global energy politics, is particularly urgent. Furthermore, the growing global interdependence in

energy and the rising consumption of primary energy sources heighten the potential scope of new security threats in the region. Consequently, ensuring regional energy security remains an exceptionally pressing challenge for the “Six Gulf States”, making it a central concern of both regional policy and international strategic considerations.

The role of Saudi Arabia in maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf region warrants particular emphasis. The Kingdom’s prosperity is closely tied to its oil and gas exports, making energy policy the most prominent priority in its foreign policy agenda. As of 2025, Saudi Arabia holds approximately 267.2 billion barrels of proven crude oil, representing about 21.5 % of total proven oil reserves within OPEC [2]. Consequently, it plays a decisive role in shaping OPEC policy. As the leading member of the cartel, Saudi Arabia typically responds with prudence to potential breaches of OPEC agreements, and, when necessary, reduces its own production quota to prevent a surge in total oil supply. Through this mechanism, leading oil-producing states not only maintain high oil prices but also effectively limit incentives for industrialized nations to alter technological principles in energy production or to replace oil with alternative energy sources [10].

The role of Saudi Arabia in maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf region is particularly noteworthy. The Kingdom’s prosperity is closely tied to its oil and gas exports, making energy policy the most prominent priority in its foreign policy agenda. As of 2025, Saudi Arabia holds approximately 15 % of global proven oil reserves [5]. The Kingdom also accounts for approximately 11 % of global oil production, underscoring its significant influence in the international energy market [4].

The natural gas sector is likewise strategically important, contributing substantially to the national economy. Saudi Arabia possesses about 4-5 % of the world’s proven natural gas reserves, ranking it fourth to sixth globally, after Russia, Iran, and Qatar [1]. As the leading member of OPEC, Saudi Arabia exercises a decisive role in shaping cartel policy, often moderating its own production quotas to prevent market oversupply. Through these mechanisms, the Kingdom and other leading oil-producing countries not only maintain high oil prices but also limit incentives for industrialized nations to significantly alter technological principles in energy production or to shift away from oil as a primary energy source.

The increasing significance of the oil factor has, in turn, enhanced the influence and standing of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states within the Arab and Islamic world, despite the principle that “oil belongs to all Arabs.” Consequently, a primary objective of Saudi Arabia’s energy policy is to maintain balance in relations with other Arab states, thereby supporting Arab unity, mitigating religious and ideological tensions in the region, and preventing the proliferation of radical or extremist sentiments.

The immense energy potential of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states inevitably attracts the attention of major global powers. The steady increase in global energy consumption, the gradual depletion of oil and gas reserves, and the limited success of efforts to develop alternative energy sources have collectively intensified energy competition. It is well established that the majority of global energy demand continues to be met by regions rich in oil and gas resources. Notably, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Caspian Basin constitute the primary operational zones for actors in the global energy market.

Consequently, political tensions, unresolved historical conflicts, and the challenge of ensuring political and socio-economic stability in these regions remain pressing issues. Although the GCC states can be considered relatively stable within the broader Middle East, they are not immune to overarching security concerns and the necessity of fostering reliable partnership relations.

The increasing degree of energy interdependence implies that no single state can independently ensure its national energy security. Therefore, the geo-energy interests of the GCC states are intrinsically linked to the positions of regional actors such as Iran and Iraq. Iran's ideological and political influence in the region, combined with its substantial energy capacity, inevitably impacts the foreign policy calculations of neighboring states.

In light of these dynamics, the analysis of contemporary threats to energy security in the Persian Gulf requires attention to two key aspects. First, it is essential to assess internal threats to regional energy security, and second, to examine the geopolitical conflicts of interest among major external powers that intersect within the region.

Discussion

Several internal factors significantly influence the energy security of the Persian Gulf region:

- Iran's nuclear program and associated policies pose the most significant political and economic threat to the security of the GCC states. The international community's stringent political and economic pressures on Iran have heightened concern among Gulf states regarding regional stability.
- The ongoing instability in Iraq negatively impacts the implementation of prospective economic projects within the GCC. Iraq is estimated to hold approximately 9% of the world's proven oil reserves, making its stability crucial for the execution of regional energy initiatives [6].
- Intensifying religious conflicts, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities, create a persistent atmosphere of rivalry. Consequently, the region is often perceived as a hotspot for terrorism, while the rise of radical perspectives toward Islamic religion and culture affects foreign investment in the oil and gas sector and constrains the ability to capture emerging energy markets.
- Another pressing concern is the finite nature of traditional resources, oil and gas reserves. Disputes over the sustainable utilization of natural resources and approaches to adjusting export volumes represent a critical challenge for the GCC states and the broader region. The economic and political stability of the six Gulf states remains heavily dependent on the oil and gas factor, underscoring the centrality of hydrocarbons in regional governance and energy policy.

Several external factors significantly influence the security of the Persian Gulf region, particularly its energy security:

- The global awareness of depleting natural resources and the pursuit of national interests by major powers have intensified threats to the Persian Gulf. Regardless of the region's abundant natural resources, these states have historically been targets for powerful nations, and today the region remains politically unstable, with ongoing disputes and internal conflicts [11]. The policies of major powers in the region are directly linked to controlling oil and gas resources. As noted by I.A. Karimov: "Those who control oil and gas reserves are increasingly perceived as capable of wielding global influence. Conversely, states without such resources face external pressures and interventions, as powerful nations recognize that control over such wealth serves as a key instrument for extending influence over others" [8].
- The growing global energy consumption, particularly the increasing share of Asian markets, may further intensify political competition in the region. Global energy demand is projected

to increase by up to 60 % by 2030 [7]. This trend is directly linked to Iran's role in regional energy dynamics. Countries such as China, India, Pakistan, and Japan are rapidly increasing their energy consumption and have a vested interest in participating in regional energy competition and pursuing favorable foreign energy policies. Notably, disputes over Iran's gas exports to China and the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline have become a significant factor in the GCC states' external energy strategies, as Iran may emerge as a primary energy competitor in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the security of the Persian Gulf and the energy security of the GCC states remain central pillars of regional and global strategic calculations. The enormous hydrocarbon resources of the GCC, coupled with the finite nature of global oil and gas reserves, ensure that these states continue to occupy a pivotal position in international energy markets. Rising global energy demand, particularly in Asia further amplifies the region's significance, while Iran's growing influence and the ongoing instability in Iraq present both internal and external challenges that directly shape the foreign policy priorities of the GCC states.

The historical precedent, noted by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, that oil and politics are inseparably linked, remains highly relevant today. The use of energy resources as instruments of political leverage, the geopolitical competition over pipeline routes, and the global strategic interest in Gulf hydrocarbons demonstrate that energy security is not merely an economic issue but a decisive factor in regional stability and international relations.

Any disruption in the energy balance of the Persian Gulf would not only threaten the political and economic stability of the GCC states but also have far-reaching consequences for Central and South Asia, global energy markets, and the broader international system. Therefore, sustaining a stable, secure, and cooperative regional energy environment is paramount, and the GCC states' coordinated energy diplomacy and strategic management of hydrocarbon resources will continue to define their influence in global geopolitics.

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