



CENTRAL ASIA - GCC RELATIONS: EXEMPLARY COOPERATION WITHIN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Nesibe Hicret Battaloğlu and Bülent Aras

Upon the invitation of Saudi Crown Prince Muhamad bin Salman, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-Central Asia Summit was held on July 19, 2023 in the Saudi city of Jeddah. The summit demonstrated the Gulf monarchies' increasing interest in cooperation with Central Asian countries (C5), as an emerging bloc in the global south. The meeting can be considered a milestone in region-to-region cooperation between the GCC and Central Asia, given their compatible economic agendas and religious-cultural ties. The joint statement issued by the GCC and Central Asia Summit affirms the keen interest from both parties to enhance their cooperation in economic, political, cultural, and security matters. The leaders placed significant emphasis on their shared vision for a more tolerant version of Islam, promoting peaceful coexistence, and combating Islamophobia. Beyond the religious sphere, Central Asia as a region carries geopolitical, geo-strategic and geo-economic importance for the GCC countries to push for deepened ties. This policy brief aims to shed light on the flourishing relations between the GCC and Central Asia, two critical regions in terms of energy security, trade connectivity and global security, amidst widening crises in their neighborhood regions.

Introduction

Upon the invitation of Saudi Crown Prince Muhamad bin Salman (MbS), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-Central Asia Summit was held on July 19, 2023 in the Saudi city of Jeddah. Participants in the Jeddah summit included the presidents of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The group is also known as the Central Asian Countries (C5). From the GCC side, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Crown Prince of Kuwait Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the Vice President of the UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid attended. Oman and Bahrain's rulers were represented by Sayyid Asaad bin Tariq Al-Said, and Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al-Khalifa respectively [1].

The summit demonstrated the Gulf monarchies' increasing interest in cooperation with Central Asian countries, as an emerging bloc in the global south. The meeting can be considered a milestone in region-to-region cooperation between the GCC and Central Asia, given their compatible economic agendas and religious-cultural ties. The first joint ministerial meeting in the strategic dialogue between the GCC and C5 was held in 2022 in Saudi Arabia[2].

The joint statement issued by the GCC and Central Asia Summit affirms the keen interest from both parties to enhance their cooperation in economic, political, cultural, and security matters[3]. Explicitly, the parties agreed to expand their cooperation in regional and international security and stability, to ensure the flexibility of supply chains, in transportation and communication, food security, energy security, and water security, to develop green and renewable energy sources and technologies, in creating business and investment opportunities, and to increase trade exchange.

It is worth noting that the leaders place significant

emphasis on their shared vision for a more tolerant version of Islam, promoting peaceful coexistence, and combating Islamophobia. As a result, the Islam emerges as a religio-cultural bond that brings parties together, fostering stronger relations in various other areas. The re-embrace of Islam in Central Asia after the gaining of independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, plays a crucial role in highlighting the religious dimension within these inter-regional relations. Beyond the religious sphere, Central Asia as a region carries geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic importance for the GCC countries to push for deepened ties. This policy brief aims to shed light on the flourishing relations between the GCC and Central Asia, two critical regions in terms of energy security, trade connectivity and global security, amidst widening crises in their neighborhood regions.

Central Asia in GCC Foreign Policies

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central Asia, like many other regions, became an arena for a "new great game," involving various powers such as Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Iran, and India, all playing significant roles[4]. The interest of these major powers in Central Asia stems from its pivotal location as a strategic crossroads, where crucial economic corridors established by different nations intersect, linking the East to the West and the North to the South. Furthermore, the region's sizeable energy resources further enhance its global significance.

The GCC countries remain relative newcomers and small players in the region compared to Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey. Yet their interest and interventions to develop bilateral and regional relations are by no means less ambitious. The Gulf monarchies' diversified and deepened ties with Russia and China play a particular role in this newly generated interest. The four members of the C5 countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are founding members of the Sino-

Russia dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and it is no secret that the Gulf monarchies are keen to deepen their partnerships with the SCO. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait have joined the SCO as dialogue partners[5]. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are members of the Organization of Turkic States alongside Turkey, and flourishing relations between GCC countries and Turkey promise further development of the relations through this organization in future. However, it is important to note that Gulf countries have not only followed a hedging policy toward the global powers, but have also charted a distinctive and autonomous path, focusing on diversifying their alliances. This shift in approach stems from the

significant foreign policy roles of the GCC states, which are now regarded as influential, assertive, and independent centers in their own right.

GCC Development Aid to Central Asia

The official development aid is a significant part of their foreign policies, and aims to address developmental and humanitarian issues in the targeted countries. The estimates from the OECD data highlight the significance of C5 for four key GCC countries: Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Figure 1 below illustrates gross aid disbursements to Central Asian Countries by GCC states. Between 2018 and 2021, there was a noticeable rise in the amount of aid provided by the UAE, Saudi Arabia,

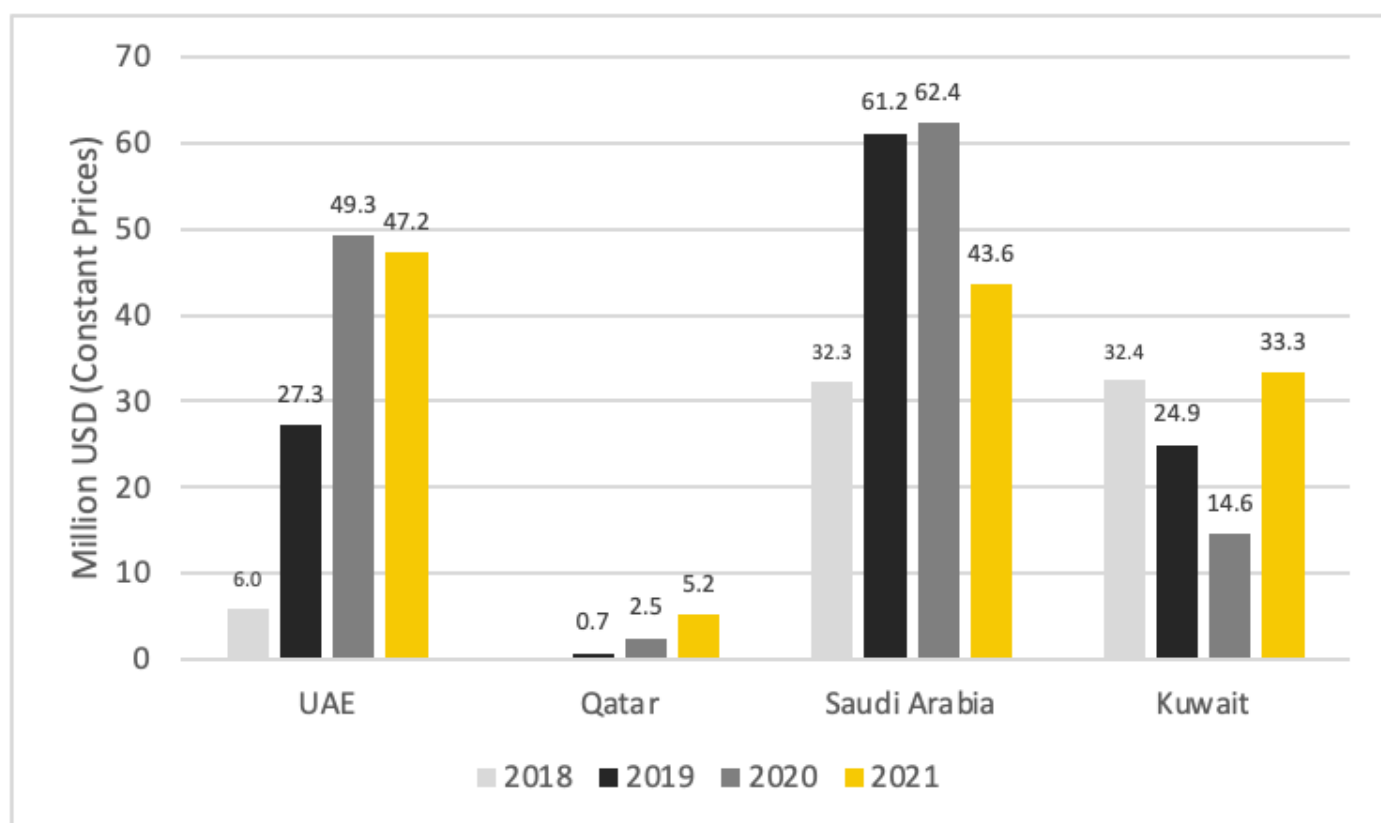


Figure 1: Gross Aid Disbursements to Central Asia Countries by GCC States (Million USD)

Source: OECD-Creditor Reporting System

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and Kuwait to C5. The OECD-DAC statistics for Qatar have only been available since the year 2019. Similar to other GCC countries, Qatar's total aid allocation also experienced an upward trend from 2019 to 2021.

In 2021, the largest aid disbursement was contributed by the UAE, totaling 47 million dollars. Following closely, Saudi Arabia provided 44 million dollars, and Kuwait allocated 33 million dollars. Qatar, on the other hand, had the lowest contribution with 5.2 million dollars. However, spanning the period from 2018 to 2021, Saudi Arabia emerged as the top contributor in terms of aid to the C5. Upon examining the share of the C5 in the total aid provided by Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, a similar increase in trends

becomes apparent (see Figure 2). For instance, the share of the C5 in Qatar's overall total aid has risen from 0.7 percent to 5.2 percent over the period 2019-2021. Between 2018 and 2021, we observe parallel increases in the share of the C5 from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait as well. Although the significance of the C5 within the GCC states is comparable, the allocation of aid to each individual Central Asian country varies between Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of aid allocated to each individual Central Asian country within the total aid provided by the GCC states in the year 2021. Figure 3 clearly demonstrates that, in 2021, the majority of foreign aid disbursements to Central Asia from the UAE and Kuwait were predominantly

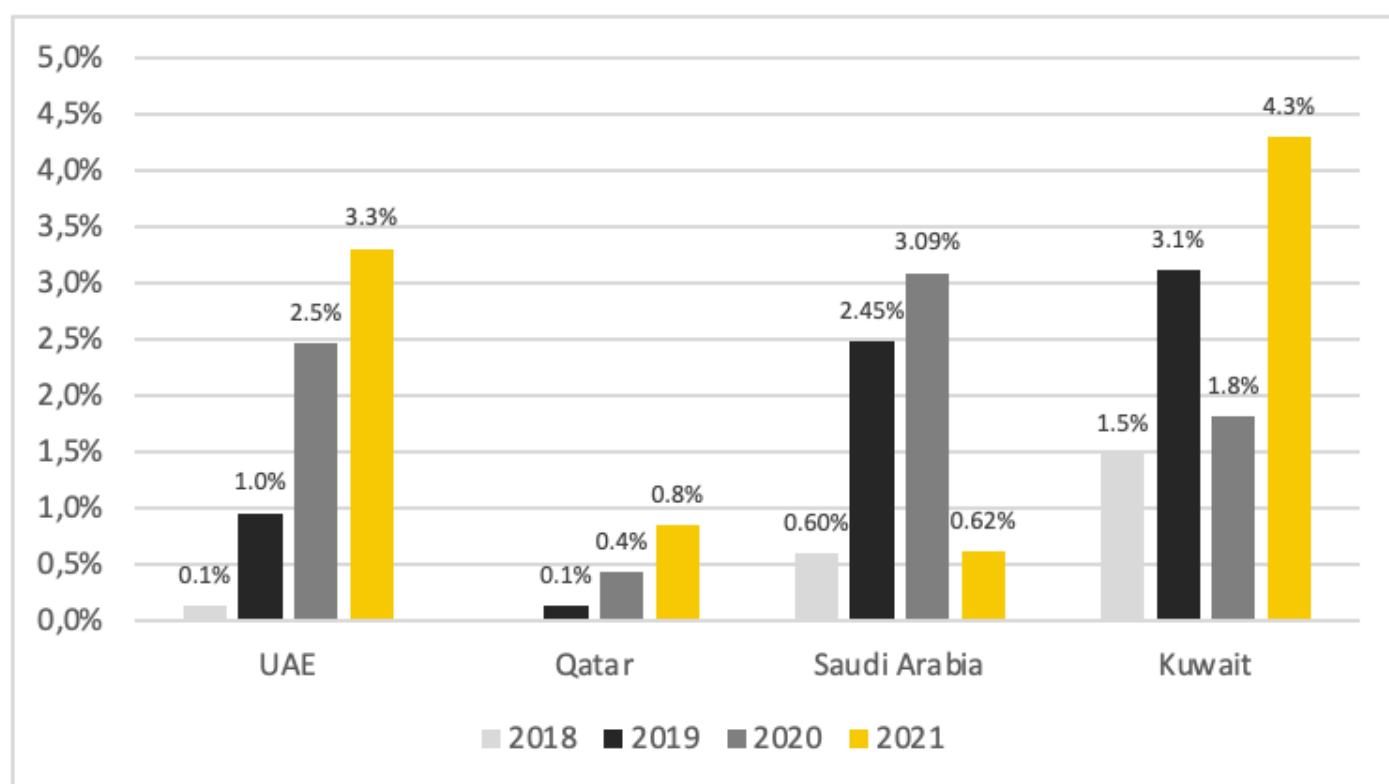


Figure 2: Share of Central Asian Countries in Total Aid of GCC States (%)

Source: OECD-Creditor Reporting System

directed to Uzbekistan. In contrast, Tajikistan received the most substantial amount of aid from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the allocation of aid among the C5 was not uniformly concentrated. For instance, the UAE's aid was primarily concentrated on Uzbekistan, accounting for 74 percent. In contrast, Saudi Arabia's aid was distributed across Tajikistan (41 percent), Kyrgyzstan (36 percent), and Uzbekistan (21 percent). Kazakhstan received the most significant share from Qatar, amounting to 31 percent, in comparison to the other GCC states.

GCC Economic Relations with Central Asia

The renewed interest of the Gulf monarchies in

strengthening ties with C5 can be attributed to their strategic plans for economic diversification beyond the traditional oil sector. Recognizing the importance of reducing dependence on oil revenues, they are seeking to explore new avenues for growth and stability in non-oil industries. Central Asia's emerging economies provide a platform for trade diversification. Table 1 illustrates the foreign trade dynamics between the GCC states and the economies of the C5. Among the Gulf states, the UAE stands out, with the most substantial trade volume, while Oman demonstrates the lowest trade engagement. In terms of the proportion of C5 countries' share in foreign trade, their contributions appear to remain notably low, each falling below 1 percent. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that there have been noteworthy increases in foreign trade,

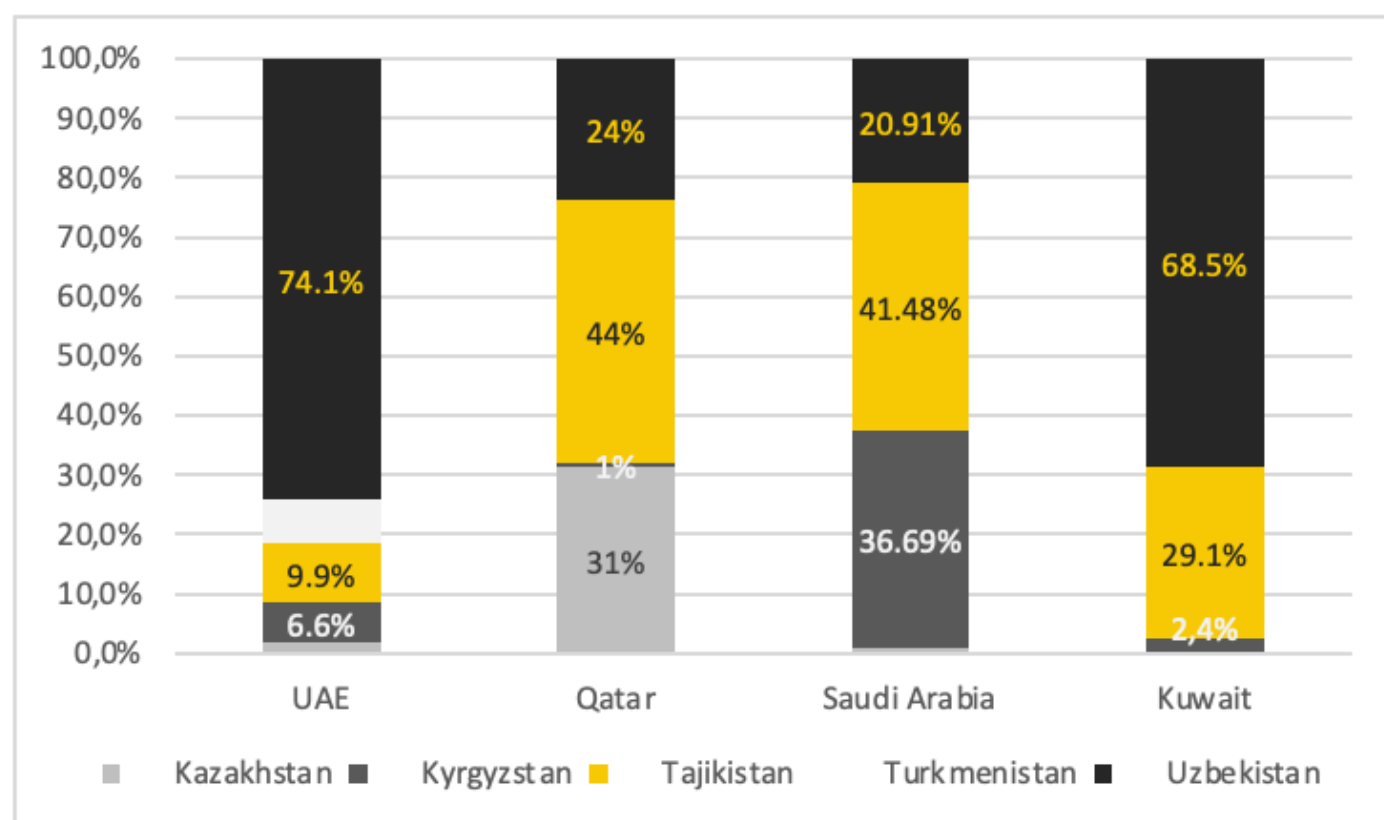


Figure 3: Share of Central Asian Countries in C5 Aid Disbursements (2021)

Source: OECD-Creditor Reporting System

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particularly with certain C5 countries. For instance, over the past 22 years, Qatar's exports to Kazakhstan have seen consistent growth, with an annualized rate of 34 percent. Starting at 4.5 thousand dollars in 1998, these exports escalated to 2.8 million dollars by the year 2020 (see The Economic Complexity Observatory (OEC) platform for more details)[6].

Besides, over the period 1995-2021, Saudi Arabia's exports to Turkmenistan have displayed a noteworthy growth trend, characterized by an annualized rate of 13 percent. This trajectory has led to exports reaching 2.28 million dollars in the year 2021. Such increases are not limited to exports only. To illustrate, over the period 1995-2021, imports into the UAE from Kyrgyzstan

have revealed a significant growth pattern, with an annualized growth rate of 36 percent, reaching 216 million dollars by the end of 2021. The distribution of exports from GCC states to C5 is displayed in Figure 4. This depiction reveals that the intensity of trade relationships between the Gulf states and the C5 differs between each individual C5 state. Notably, Qatar exports to Kazakhstan only, while Oman's main trade partner in the region is Uzbekistan.

Additionally, ensuring food security has become a pressing concern, prompting the Gulf nations to forge closer relationships with Central Asian partners, who possess valuable agricultural resources. Furthermore, the Gulf states are determined to meet their ambitious targets in the realm of renewable energy. Central Asia's vast potential in this sector presents

Exports of GCC States to Central Asian Countries (Million USD)						
	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
2018	0.0	13.7	0.3	1.5	52.6	1890
2019	0.2	0.4	0.7	0.8	1.5	1860
2020	0.00	0.01	0.2	1.1	3.6	1620
2021	0.05	0.2	2.0	0.03	6.7	2060
Imports of GCC States from Central Asian Countries (Million USD)						
	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
2018	0.0	0.8	0.0	2.2	21.1	236
2019	4.0	0.5	0.7	2.7	34.0	597
2020	0.00	1.61	0.1	4.5	31.4	392
2021	31.50	0.7	0.0	40.6	58.0	829

Table 1: Foreign Trade between GCC States and Central Asian Countries

Source: United Nations Comtrade Database

a promising opportunity for cooperation and mutual benefits, leading to a mutual interest in fostering deeper connections.

As for the C5, they will have median middle-income status soon, and play middle power roles amid significant geopolitical shifts. With the center of gravity shifting eastward toward the Middle East and Central Asia, these nations aim for recognition of their growing importance on the global stage. This realization has driven them to seek stronger ties with the Gulf countries, acknowledging the potential for mutually beneficial partnerships and enhanced regional influence. They fit into the strategies of GCC countries to make beneficial investments abroad with returns in stable political environments.

GCC Political Relations with Central Asia

Although economic and strategic interests are the backbone of the relations between C5 and Gulf monarchies, the intensified political connections also accompany this particular relationship. Early diplomatic encounters date back to the 1990s, following the recognition of the independence of post-Soviet Central Asian republics by the Gulf states. For instance, Saudi-Kazakh relations started in 1990, and the two countries established the highest level of diplomatic relations by 1997 at the ambassadorial level[7]. In 1994, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, paid the first official visit to Saudi Arabia, when the parties signed a General Agreement on Cooperation in the Trade, Economic, Investment

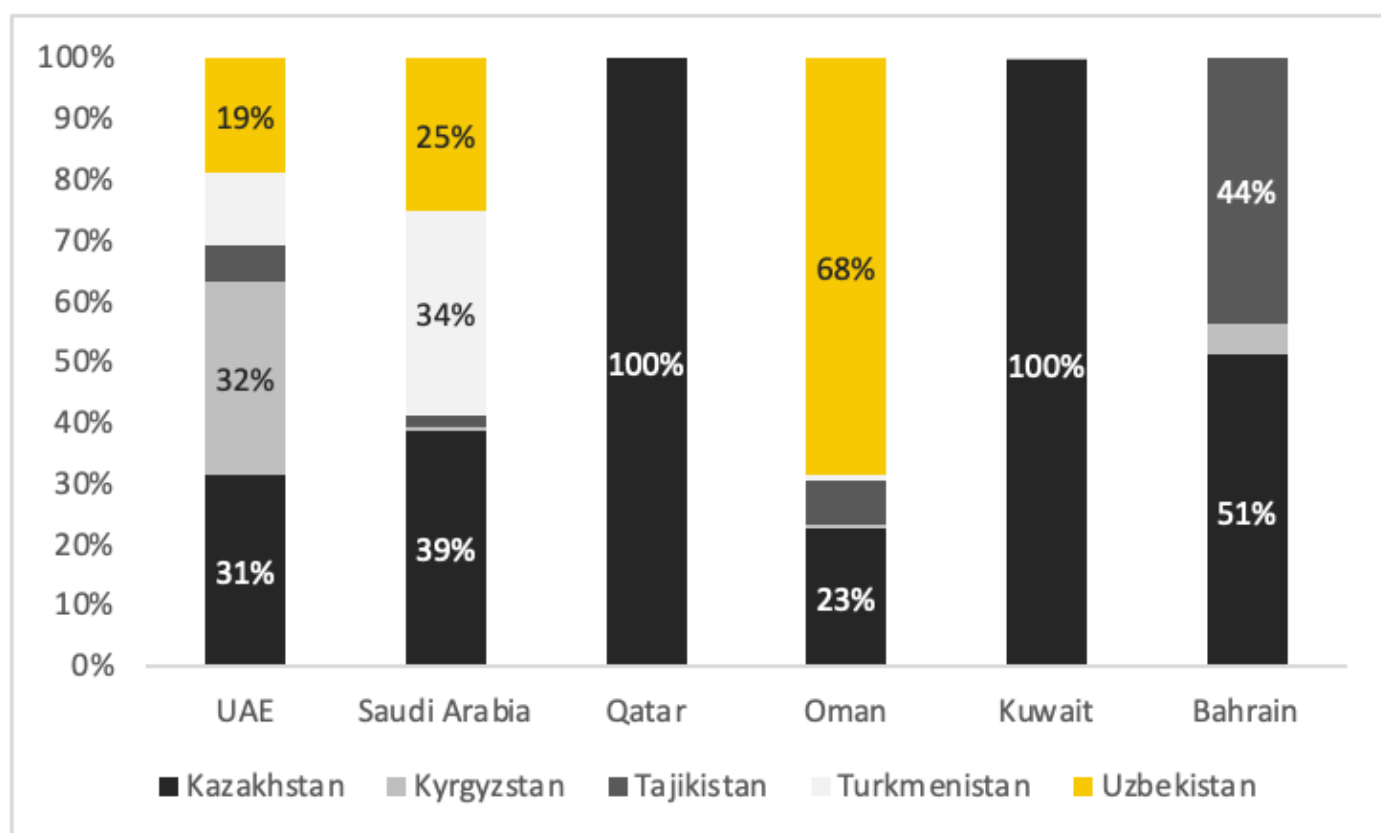


Figure 4: Distribution of Exports from GCC States to Central Asian Countries (%)

Source: OECD-Creditor Reporting System

Technical and Cultural Spheres, and the Sphere of Sports and Youth Affairs[8].

On February 22, 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, has paid five official and working visits (1997, 2001, 2005, 2016, and 2017) to Saudi Arabia, which play a key and influential role in the development of bilateral relations[9]. In March 2022, Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, paid a visit to the Kyrgyz Republic, the first in the history of Kyrgyz-Saudi relations. The first political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan and Saudi Arabia were held in Riyadh in 2019, and in 2022 Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov met the Saudi Foreign Minister in Ashgabat[10]. Most recently, Saudi Arabia introduced visa opportunities for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as those nations can apply for a visitor visa electronically or upon arrival at one of the kingdom's entry points[11].

The Gulf's political reach in Central Asia significantly gained momentum in the last decade, and other smaller Gulf monarchies showed no less interest than their Saudi counterparts in this regard. The UAE is actively pursuing a geopolitical and geo-economic agenda with C5. Turkmen-Emirati relations have flourished since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1995. In 2012, the Joint Committee for Cooperation was founded between the two countries. President Berdimuhamedov paid his first official visit to the UAE in 2022, when he met with Emirati president Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and other officials[12]. The same year, the UAE also hosted Sadyr Japarov, President of the Kyrgyz Republic, alongside a delegation, for a working visit[13].

Qatar's leadership also eyes strengthening

bilateral cooperation with the Central Asian republics, and diplomatic-political relations are an important dimension of this cooperation. Qatar opened its embassy in Astana in as early as 2008, followed by Tajikistan-Qatari embassies in 2012. The newest among them, the embassy of Turkmenistan, opened in Doha in March 2023, during Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov's official visit, during which he met with Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Qatar's Emir also embarked on a Central Asia tour on 5-8 June 2023 when he met with Central Asian leaders and signed important agreements[14]. The emir embarked on a highly engaging tour, commencing with a visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan. This was followed by a stop in the Kyrgyz Republic, which was succeeded by a visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan, where the emir participated in the Astana International Forum. The last stop of the Qatari emir's visit to Central Asia was the Republic of Tajikistan.

Throughout the emir's engagements, a clear and compelling narrative emerged, indicating the impending development of pivotal political, economic, and cultural partnerships within the realm of Qatar-Central Asia relations. A particularly noteworthy highlight emerged as Kyrgyzstan and Qatar articulated their mutual ambition to elevate their collaboration to the status of a comprehensive partnership[15]. Additionally, Uzbekistan's President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, emphatically expressed his nation's perspective on Qatar as a "promising partner" within the broader Arab-Muslim landscape, reinforcing the significance of their evolving association[16].

Concluding Observations

The reciprocal visits and agreements between Gulf monarchies and Central Asian republics reflect a shared political will to strengthen and broaden their relations. In this context, the significance of cultural and political affinities cannot be overlooked, as they play a pivotal role in bringing the GCC countries and C5 closer. Cultural affinities, particularly within the

framework of Islam, also hold a prominent place. The mutual interest in elite and traditional activities, such as falconry and equestrian sports, serves as a symbolic bridge, facilitating the deepening of bonds at both personal and national levels. The economic and development aid relations are likely to further develop the flourishing ties between the two geographies. Both regions are characterized by resource-rich and stable regimes, and there is an emerging geopolitical connectivity in this era of global turmoil, i.e. the Ukraine war and the energy crisis. They look eye to eye when it comes to foreign influence and power competition, which paves for a better understanding of each other's political and security concerns. Moreover, their overlapping economic interests and shared visions serve to amplify the potential for more profound political collaborations. The GCC humanitarian and development aid also finds important destinations in the Central Asia republics. The relations are multifaceted and progressing, and free from any major obstacle. GCC-C5 relations would be an exemplary case in cooperation within the global south, with a steady, but continuous and sure development based on the promotion of shared interests.

Endnotes

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