



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



STEP (Saudi Arabia–Turkey–Egypt–Pakistan): A New Framework for Regional Stability in the Middle East

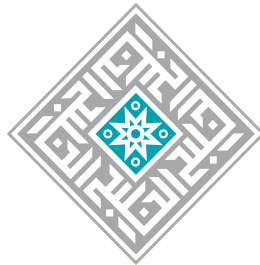


Professor Saleh Alkhathlan
Senior Advisor of Gulf Research Center



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

25
Years
Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author
and do not necessarily reflect views of the Center.



In the aftermath of the U.S.–Israeli–Iranian war, and amid growing uncertainty across the Middle East, attention is increasingly turning to an emerging pattern of regional coordination involving Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan. The significance of this coordination lies in the strategic weight of these states, the timing of its emergence, and the growing need for regional frameworks capable of supporting stability in a region where major powers appear less willing, or less able, to manage crises effectively, and where some have at times contributed to regional instability.

Unlike frameworks such as BRICS, AUKUS, and I2U2, this emerging grouping does not yet appear to have a widely recognized name or acronym. A practical designation is STEP, derived from the initials of its four members: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan. The acronym also conveys an appropriate message: A Step toward Stability.

This distinction is important because it differentiates the framework from other labels that may be misleading. Some have described it as an “alliance” or a “Sunni bloc,” but neither characterization accurately reflects its current nature. According to international relations literature, an alliance generally refers to security cooperation based on shared threats, mutual commitments, and military or institutional coordination. STEP lacks these defining characteristics.

Nor is STEP a religiously affiliated grouping, as some have portrayed it. Although all four states are Sunni-majority countries, reducing their foreign policies to religious identity is misleading because it overlooks the strategic, security, economic, and geopolitical calculations that primarily shape their regional behavior.

STEP is more accurately understood as a strategic coordination framework, or a consultative platform, that brings together states whose interests converge on preserving regional stability. It may also be seen as a regional framework for preventive diplomacy, at a time when such mechanisms are increasingly needed.

The significance of this framework lies in the complementary strengths of its members. Saudi Arabia serves as the political and economic center of gravity in the Gulf. It also occupies a unique position in the Islamic world as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, plays a central role in global energy markets, and enjoys a strategic location linking the Gulf to the Red Sea.

Turkey contributes growing military and defense-industrial capabilities, together with a strategic position connecting the Middle East with Europe,



”
A practical designation is STEP, derived from the initials of its four members: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan. The acronym also conveys an appropriate message: A Step toward Stability.

“

the Black Sea, and the Caucasus. Its membership in NATO and its active engagement in Syria, the Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean further enhance its regional influence.

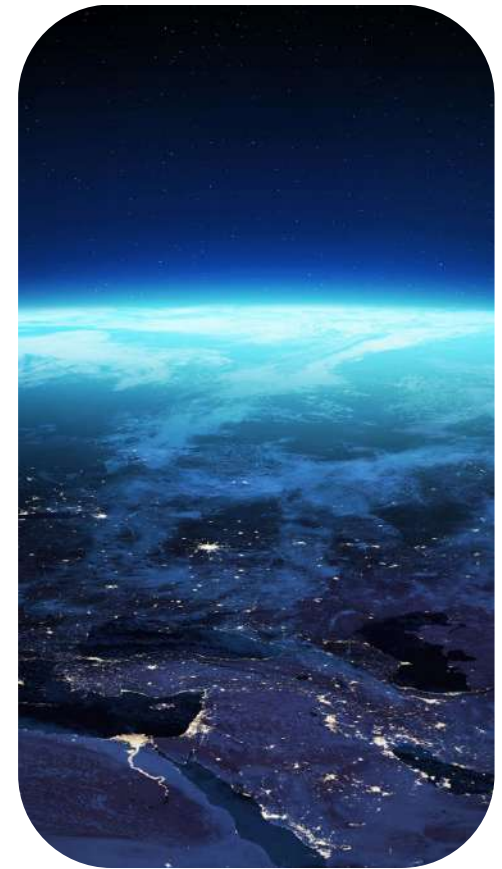
Although Egypt has become more inward-looking in recent years, partly due to the political and socioeconomic challenges that followed the Arab Spring, it continues to possess considerable diplomatic weight and long-standing institutional experience in regional crisis management. Its strategic location, anchored by the Suez Canal and access to both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, remains a major geopolitical asset. Pakistan contributes a different but equally important set of capabilities. As the only nuclear-armed state in the Islamic world, it combines substantial military capacity with significant demographic weight and occupies a strategic position linking the Gulf with South and Central Asia.

Taken together, these four countries combine a rare mix of strategic assets: economic influence, religious legitimacy, military capability, diplomatic experience, geostrategic location, demographic weight, and nuclear deterrence. This combination makes STEP more than a simple consultative framework. It brings together states that collectively possess significant capacity to shape the regional security environment and contribute to regional stability.

The emergence of this coordination is closely linked to recent changes in the regional strategic environment. Since Israel's war on Gaza following the October 7 attacks, instability across the Middle East has intensified. This has been reinforced by Israel's increasingly assertive regional posture, its frequent threats against neighboring states, statements by Israeli officials referring to a "Greater Israel" and the reshaping of the regional order, and, more recently, the U.S.–Israeli war against Iran. This instability extends well beyond these conflicts, encompassing Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Although some developments, notably in Syria, suggest limited improvement, instability remains the defining characteristic of the current regional environment.

At the same time, major powers appear either less willing or less able to perform their traditional role in maintaining regional security. Russia remains preoccupied with the war in Ukraine. China, despite its expanding economic presence and its appointment of a special envoy for the region, continues to adopt a cautious approach to the region.

The United States has gradually reduced its engagement in the Middle East as it shifted strategic attention toward Asia, while the policies of the Trump administration have introduced additional uncertainty,



”

STEP is more accurately understood as a strategic coordination framework, or a consultative platform, that brings together states whose interests converge on preserving regional stability.

“

particularly where some regional actors perceive U.S. decisions as contributing to instability rather than reinforcing regional order. Against this backdrop, closer coordination among leading regional powers represents an attempt to fill part of the emerging strategic vacuum, or at least to prevent further deterioration of the regional security environment.

The four countries also share a clear strategic interest in preserving regional stability. Instability rarely remains confined to states experiencing conflict; it generates broader political, economic, and security costs for the region's leading powers. Prolonged instability also diverts national resources away from development and economic reform.

This framework also carries a broader normative dimension. Owing to their political standing, capabilities, and historical roles, these countries have increasingly come to see themselves, albeit to varying degrees, as bearing responsibility for contributing to the security and stability of the "Muslim world". Many of today's most dangerous conflicts are unfolding in Muslim-majority regions, whether in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. Consequently, this cooperation can be understood not only through the lens of national interests, but also as an expression of a growing sense of shared responsibility toward societies that increasingly look to the major Muslim states for constructive regional leadership.

Personally, I believe that this sense of responsibility may be one of the principal drivers behind the quadrilateral framework. Strategic interests, important as they are, are not sufficient by themselves to explain why these four countries feel compelled to coordinate so closely at this juncture. Moreover, a historical examination of this group's positions within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on a range of regional and international issues reveals early signs of this pattern of collective action.

As noted above, this normative dimension is far more complex than reducing it to a sectarian explanation or interpreting Iran's absence from the framework as evidence of such a dynamic. The fundamental distinction lies not in sectarian identity, but rather in differing approaches to regional order. The four countries generally favor preserving state institutions, promoting stability, and maintaining the regional status quo, whereas Iran has pursued a more revisionist approach aimed at expanding its influence, often treating the security and stability of regional states as leverage in its long-running confrontation with the United States and Israel since the 1979 Revolution.



”
Taken together, these four countries combine a rare mix of strategic assets: economic influence, religious legitimacy, military capability, diplomatic experience, geostrategic location, demographic weight, and nuclear deterrence.
“

Naturally, the evolution of this coordinating framework will not be without challenges. Its success will depend on sustained political will and the ability to translate that commitment into effective and enduring mechanisms for coordination. It will also face external, regional, and domestic pressures that may affect its capacity to develop and endure over time.

Externally, some regional and international actors may view any independent coordination among these states with caution. Israel, for example, has portrayed it as a “Sunni alliance,” thereby casting it as a sectarian alignment in order to mobilize regional and international opposition against it. Likewise, the United States may have reservations about regional arrangements that reduce its traditional role in managing the regional security architecture.

At the regional level, some middle and smaller powers may also view any framework that gives these four countries a greater role in regional affairs with caution, fearing a reduction in their own influence. Over the past decade, a number of middle and smaller powers, particularly in the Gulf, have become more active across the region. They may therefore be reluctant to support an arrangement that appears to exclude them or reduce their role in shaping regional outcomes.

The framework also faces internal challenges, as each member has distinct strategic priorities. Turkey remains focused on the security of its southern border, the Kurdish issue, and its relationship with Europe, while developments in the Caucasus and Central Asia continue to demand Ankara’s attention. Egypt continues to prioritize domestic economic and political challenges. Pakistan must manage its complex relationship with India and maintain a delicate balance in its relations with Iran and the GCC states. As for Saudi Arabia, although regional stability remains at the forefront of its foreign policy priorities, it continues to focus on a range of national and regional objectives, foremost among them the successful implementation of Vision 2030 and addressing the multifaceted dimensions of the conflict in Yemeni.

The principal challenge facing STEP, therefore, is not the absence of political will, but the ability to build durable mechanisms for coordination despite differing national priorities, a demanding regional environment, and external efforts to limit the framework’s strategic autonomy.

Iran remains the most sensitive variable in determining the future of this initiative, not only because of its central role in regional tensions, but also because of how the Iranian leadership may interpret this framework. Should Tehran perceive as a mechanism of coordination



”
The principal challenge facing STEP, therefore, is not the absence of political will, but the ability to build durable mechanisms for coordination despite differing national priorities, a demanding regional environment, and external efforts to limit the framework’s strategic autonomy.
“

directed against it, or as a sectarian alignment intended to contain its influence, it is likely to seek to undermine the initiative. Given that both Iranian policy and Israel's aggressive policies constitute two of the principal sources of instability in the region, managing relations with both will represent the central challenge confronting this new framework.

At the same time, this reality does not preclude the existence of channels upon which constructive engagement with Iran can be built. All four countries maintain diplomatic channels with Tehran and have, to varying degrees, participated in mediation efforts aimed at ending the war, with Pakistan playing a particularly prominent role in this regard. Consequently, STEP has the potential to evolve into a platform for coordinating policies and managing crises related to Iran, which appears likely to remain the defining variable in any future regional security architecture over the coming years.

The quadrilateral coordination framework, which we have proposed naming STEP, represents a significant development in the search for regional arrangements better equipped to address the Middle East's recurring crises. It provides a flexible mechanism for coordination and consultation among influential regional powers, with the potential to improve crisis management, reduce the risks of escalation, and respond more effectively to the consequences of great-power policies, as well as the declining effectiveness of international institutions.

Nevertheless, the long-term effectiveness of this framework will depend on its gradual development, and potentially its institutionalization, as well as its ability to engage with other regional actors. Ultimately, stability in a region where crises have become a persistent feature of regional interactions cannot be secured by four states alone.



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)**

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Riyadh**

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Geneva**

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels**

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium