

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

GCC's Moment of Truth

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S*ummary*

Iran's targeting of GCC Member States represents an unprecedented challenge in the organisation's 45-year history.

The joint United States–Israel attack on Iran has put the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in a complex and precarious situation. Soon after the US and Israel attacked Iran, the latter retaliated by targeting Israel and the GCC countries. As of now, Iran has attacked all the GCC countries along with Iraq, Jordan and Turkiye, alleging that these countries host military bases of the United States in the region, which makes them legitimate targets during the war. However, as the war has progressed, Iranian missiles and drones have hit several non-military targets in the GCC countries, including ports, energy infrastructures, hotels and other civilian facilities.

The Iranian attack on the GCC countries was anticipated. Even before the start of the war, Iran had announced that if the United States attacked Iran, it would attack the United States’ military bases in the region.¹ For Iran, the US military installations in the GCC countries are genuine threats to its security. There is a significant difference in perceptions of Iran and the GCC countries in this regard. While Iran believes that it is legitimate for it to target the American military bases in the Gulf, as they cannot hit the US directly, the GCC countries believe that the Iranian attack on their territory is a violation of their sovereignty.²

As the US started moving its military assets towards the Gulf, the GCC states reiterated that they will not allow their territories to be used for launching attacks against Iran. In fact, Oman played a crucial role in mediating the three rounds of indirect US–Iran talks held in Muscat and Geneva in February 2026. But all these declarations of neutrality and mediation efforts did not spare them from the Iranian attacks. The GCC countries, which appealed for dialogue and negotiation between the US and Iran to resolve their differences, are taken aback by the scale and intensity of the Iranian attack and the damage it has inflicted on them.

GCC’s Strategic Predicament

The GCC countries find themselves in the middle of an unprecedented quagmire. Any retaliation against Iranian attacks could be interpreted as aligning with the US and Israel against another friendly neighbouring Islamic country. The GCC countries’ military response to Iran would undermine their position of neutrality, which they have maintained in their policy towards the war. This might also generate a negative,

¹ [“If US Stacks, Iran Says It Will Strike US Bases in the Region”](#), *The New Arab*, 7 February 2026.

² [“HE GCCSG: The Brutal Iranian Aggression Against Duqm Port and an Oil Tanker Off the Coast of Oman is Grave Violation of the Sultanate’s Sovereignty & Unacceptable Escalation Threatening Regional Security”](#), Gulf Cooperation Council, 1 March 2026.

unfavourable domestic perception of the GCC rulers. Further, retaliation against the Iranian attacks risks triggering a military escalation in the region that would be difficult to contain.

Iran, on its part, continues to attack the American bases in the GCC countries. In the aftermath of the US attack on the Kharg and Abu Musa islands, Iran alleged that the attack was launched from the UAE and stated that Iran would respond to the attack.³ It is important to note that Iran and the UAE have a longstanding dispute over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb in the Gulf.

The energy-exporting GCC countries are deeply concerned about the economic impact of the war. Disruption in the Strait of Hormuz is extremely concerning for them, as it directly affects their national economies. Therefore, their strategy emphasises restraint and de-escalation, aimed at preventing further instability that could undermine their long-term national visions of economic development, regional security and stability in the Gulf.

The most important question at this point is how long the GCC countries can tolerate Iran's military attack without retaliating. The GCC countries have stated that they reserve their legal right to respond to the Iranian attacks. At the same time, they are relying on diplomacy and negotiation to stop the war and stabilise the region. Israel and the US possess the resources and military capabilities required to sustain a prolonged conflict. Likewise, Iran has developed considerable drone and missile capabilities that enable it to retaliate against American and Israeli strikes. The GCC countries will be most affected if the war continues for a long time.

US, GCC and Regional Security Architecture

The evolving situation represents a huge test for the future of the US–GCC partnership in defence and security. The US–GCC partnership has long been one of the most defining features of the regional security architecture in the Gulf. However, the GCC countries’ confidence in the American security umbrella was visibly shaken in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on the Hamas targets in Doha in 2025, which they alleged was a violation of their sovereignty. As the Iranian drones and missiles continue to hit them, a sense of vulnerability and helplessness has emerged among the GCC states.

³ [“Iran Says Attacks on Its Islands Were Launched from UAE, Vows to Respond”](#), *Press TV*, 14 March 2026.

The continuing reliance of GCC states on the US security umbrella makes them vulnerable and exposes them to future Iranian attacks. At the same time, their longstanding military partnership with the US cannot be easily abandoned. Nor is it feasible for them to align with Iran to build a new regional security architecture in the Gulf. Any shift in the US–GCC security partnership will have tremendous implications for the future regional security architecture in the Gulf.

The GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, have played an important role in mediating several regional conflicts across West Asia and Africa. Ironically, in the current situation, these very mediators have themselves come under attack from a neighbouring country despite having no direct involvement in the war. This raises a critical question: when the traditional mediators are targeted, who will assume the role of mediation in the region?

Since its establishment in 1981, the GCC has faced numerous political and security challenges, including regional wars, internal disagreements and organisational disunity. Among others, the organisation has witnessed and managed crises such as the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), the Gulf War of 1991, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring protests and the Qatar crisis.

However, the current situation—where Iran is targeting member states but they are deliberately exercising restraint and avoiding retaliation—represents an unprecedented challenge in the 45 years of the organisation’s history. It is also noteworthy that the GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, rank among the world’s leading military spenders and possess some of the most advanced weapon systems. But they are exhibiting political and strategic restraint by avoiding military action that could further widen and escalate the war.

If the conflict ends without any retaliation by the GCC states against Iranian attacks, it may reinforce their longstanding concerns about Iran’s growing dominance in the region. At the same time, their strategic partnership with the US makes them vulnerable to future Iranian attacks. The GCC’s reliance on the US has not insulated it from the Iranian attacks, and it has chosen restraint over retaliation to safeguard its broader security and economic interests. The present situation seems to be a moment of truth for the GCC.

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