

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Deteriorating GCC–Iran Relations amid Renewed Tensions in West Asia

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June 11, 2026

## **S***ummary*

The joint US–Israel war against Iran has exposed the fragility of Iran–GCC relations. While the GCC states have displayed a considerable degree of unity in condemning Iranian attacks on them, the conflict has also highlighted differences among the GCC states regarding their responses to Iranian military actions.

The joint United States–Israel strike on Iran in February 2026 has significantly altered the dynamics of Iran's relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies. Iranian retaliatory strikes against US military bases and civilian targets across all six GCC states, coupled with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, have severely affected GCC–Iran relations. Despite suffering considerable physical damage and civilian casualties, the Gulf monarchies have adopted a largely restrained approach towards Iran, seeking to avoid further escalation. At present, the future trajectory of Iran–GCC relations remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the relationship has become more strained and complicated as the West Asian region remains turbulent.

## Iranian Attack and the GCC's Response

The GCC member states were subjected to a significant number of missile and drone attacks launched by Iran during the war. Despite sustaining substantial damage, the GCC countries refrained from retaliatory military action to avoid further escalation. GCC condemned the Iranian missile and drone attacks on them. For the GCC, the Iranian attacks were a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of its member states. In the face of the Iranian attacks, all the GCC states showed full solidarity with each other.<sup>1</sup>

The GCC condemned the Iranian attacks on them and stated that it retains the right to respond to the Iranian aggression. On 1 March 2026, the GCC held its 50<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Meeting of the Ministerial Council to discuss the Iranian attacks on its member states. The Council reiterated its position, in accordance with the Joint Defence Agreement and the GCC Charter, that an attack against any member state is an attack on all GCC member states.<sup>2</sup>

Iran had previously clarified to the GCC countries its reservations regarding the presence of American military bases in the region. Iran has stated that it is committed to the principle of good neighbourliness and that it has no big differences with individual GCC countries. However, the American military presence in its neighbourhood is a red line.<sup>3</sup> For the GCC countries, the American security umbrella is crucial to their national security. Iran had also made clear before the start of the

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<sup>1</sup> [“HE GCCSG Condemns in the Strongest Terms the Blatant and Nefarious Iranian Targeting of the Territories of the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan”](#), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 28 February 2026.

<sup>2</sup> [“Statement Issued by the 50th Extraordinary Meeting of the Ministerial Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\) Regarding the Iranian Aggression Against the GCC”](#), GCC, 1 March 2026.

<sup>3</sup> [“Iran Firmly Committed to Principle of Good Neighborliness: Spokesman”](#), *Tasnim News*, 30 April 2026.

war that if Israel and the United States launch an attack on Iran, then the United States’ military bases in the GCC countries will be regarded as their legitimate military targets.<sup>4</sup>

As the US and Israel started attacking Iran, it not only responded to Israel but also launched simultaneous attacks on American bases in all the GCC countries. This has put the GCC countries in a political and strategic dilemma. Their retaliation to the Iranian attacks would have been seen as aligning with the United States and Israel in their war on Iran. Non-retaliation to the continuous Iranian strikes on their territory portrays them as weak powers in front of Iran, which was violating their territorial sovereignty. This is where differences among the GCC countries started to emerge and gradually consolidate.

The intensity of the attacks, however, varied across the GCC states. The UAE experienced the highest number of attacks, receiving more than 2,500 missile and drone strikes since the outbreak of the war.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by Kuwait with 791 attacks, Bahrain with 429 attacks, Qatar with 270 attacks, and Oman, which reported 22 drone attacks.<sup>6</sup> There are several reasons why Iran targeted the UAE more than any other country. Iran perceives the UAE as being closely aligned with Israel, particularly following the signing of the Abraham Accords and the normalisation of relations between the two countries in 2020. Since then, cooperation between the UAE and Israel has grown significantly across political, economic and security domains.

Several reports suggest that during the US–Israel–Iran War, Israel has supplied air defence systems and military personnel to assist the UAE in addressing the threats emanating from Iran.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it is widely believed that the UAE has launched retaliatory attacks against Iran,<sup>8</sup> although Abu Dhabi has not publicly acknowledged any direct military involvement or aggressive response. Furthermore, tensions between Iran and the UAE are also shaped by their longstanding territorial dispute over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb in the Persian Gulf, which remains a source of friction in their bilateral relations.

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<sup>4</sup> [“Iran Not Target Its Neighbors but US Bases in Region”](#), *Mehr News*, 5 March 2026.

<sup>5</sup> [“UAE Participates in Virtual Foreign Ministers Meeting on the Strait of Hormuz”](#), UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 April 2026.

<sup>6</sup> [“Iran Launched 83% of Missiles and Drones at the Gulf Compared to 17% at Israel”](#), *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 26 March 2026.

<sup>7</sup> [“Israel Sent Laser System to UAE to Help Intercept Iranian Missiles and Drones — Report”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 1 May 2026.

<sup>8</sup> [“UAE Secretly Joined Israeli-US Strikes on Iran: Report”](#), *Middle East Eye*, 1 May 2026.

Iran launched drones and missiles towards Saudi Arabia, prompting strong condemnation from Riyadh. Saudi Arabia initially stated that it reserved the right to self-defence in response to Iranian military attacks. Saudi Arabia has also clarified that its airspace was not used to launch strikes on Iran.<sup>9</sup> It was later reported that Saudi Arabia carried out covert retaliatory strikes against Iran, although Riyadh did not publicly acknowledge any such military action.<sup>10</sup> The Iranian attacks and the alleged Saudi retaliation significantly undermined the progress achieved in improving bilateral relations between the two countries.

The Iranian strikes on Qatar and Oman have come as a significant surprise, given the mediatory roles both countries have played in the ongoing crisis. While Qatar has been actively involved in facilitating negotiations between Israel and Hamas, Oman has served as an important intermediary in diplomatic engagements between the United States and Iran. Notably, Iran targeted Qatar’s largest LNG facility, the Ras Laffan industrial complex, which is the world’s largest LNG production facility that accounts for nearly 20 per cent of global LNG production capacity.<sup>11</sup> The attack compelled Qatar to declare force majeure on certain supply contracts,<sup>12</sup> raising concerns over global energy security and supply disruptions. Like other Gulf states, Qatar has also suffered considerable economic losses as a consequence of the war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Oman has traditionally adopted a conciliatory approach towards Iran, shaped in part by their shared maritime boundary in the Strait of Hormuz. This partly explains why Oman has received the least number of Iranian missile and drone attacks during the ongoing conflict among all the GCC countries. Although Iran has advocated imposing certain levies on ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz, Oman has continued to support the status quo ante with respect to freedom of navigation. It is not keen on imposing fees on ships transiting the strait.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Kuwait and Bahrain have also come under a significant number of Iranian missile and drone attacks during the War. Energy production and supply of Kuwait and Bahrain suffered, and both countries declared force majeure. However, unlike

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<sup>9</sup> [“Riyadh Rejects Claims Saudi Airspace was Opened for Attacks Linked to Iran”](#), *Arab News*, 8 March 2026.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Schmitt and Vivian Nereim, [“Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. Carried Out Secret Attacks in Iran, U.S. Officials Say”](#), *The New York Times*, 14 May 2026.

<sup>11</sup> [“Qatar Says Iran Attack Caused Significant Damage at Ras Laffan Gas Facility”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2026.

<sup>12</sup> [“Qatar Energy Declares Force Majeure on Some LNG Contracts due to Iran War”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 24 March 2026.

<sup>13</sup> [“Oman Says No Transit Fees Can be Imposed in Strait of Hormuz”](#), *Saudi Gazette*, 8 April 2026.

the UAE and Saudi Arabia, other countries have refrained from retaliating against Iran. Their restrained response appears to stem from concerns that any direct military retaliation could provoke further Iranian attacks and lead to a wider escalation of the war.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has already had a significant impact on the energy-exporting GCC states. In addition, energy infrastructure across the region has been disrupted by Iranian missile and drone attacks on several energy facilities. Over the longer term, the economic consequences could be even more severe, given that the energy sector remains the principal pillar of GCC economies.

As the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz continues, two major oil producers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have sought alternative routes to maintain their energy exports. Saudi Arabia has increased the use of its East–West Pipeline (Petroline), which connects the Abqaiq oil facilities in the Eastern Province to the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea. Following the closure of the Strait, the pipeline is now operating at its full capacity.

The UAE already has an alternative export route through the Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline (ADCOP), commonly known as the Habshan-Fujairah Pipeline, which bypasses the Strait of Hormuz. In 2025, the UAE commenced construction of a second West–East Pipeline to expand its crude oil export capacity further. According to the UAE government, approximately 50 per cent of the project has been completed, and the pipeline is expected to become operational in 2027.<sup>14</sup>

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE have partially mitigated the impact of the Strait's closure through alternative export routes, other GCC states, particularly Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain, continue to face significant challenges sustaining their energy exports due to their greater dependence on the Strait of Hormuz.

## **Difference in the GCC Ranks**

Furthermore, the GCC has thus far been unable to formulate a unified military and security policy in response to Iranian attacks and acts of aggression that have infringed upon the sovereignty of its member states. The GCC members signed a Joint Defence Agreement in 2000. Among others, the Agreement stated that ‘any attack on any of them is an attack on all of them and any threat to one of them is a

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<sup>14</sup> Waheed Abbas, [“UAE’s Second Pipeline Bypassing Strait of Hormuz 50% Complete, Says Al Jaber”](#), *Khaleej Times*, 20 May 2026.

threat to all of them’.<sup>15</sup> Further, in March 2024, the GCC announced a ‘Vision for Regional Security’. Reiterating the sentiment, the vision document also stated that any threat to one member State is a threat to all member States.<sup>16</sup> But despite this stated objective and commitment, the GCC has not been able to act when all the member states have come under attack from Iran.

Although the GCC states have collectively expressed concern over Iranian attacks against them, significant differences remain in the extent of their concern and in their respective policy responses. The UAE, having experienced the highest number of Iranian missile and drone attacks, has adopted a comparatively stronger stance towards Tehran. In contrast, countries such as Oman and Qatar continue to pursue a conciliatory approach, hoping that the situation will normalise without necessitating direct military retaliation against Iran.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has reportedly proposed a regional non-aggression pact with Iran as a means of mitigating the security dilemma arising from the continued American military presence in the region, while simultaneously seeking to insulate itself from future Iranian attacks in the event of a wider regional conflict.<sup>17</sup> It seeks to preserve and further expand the gains it has made through the 2023 rapprochement.

Due to the varying intensity of their engagement with Iran and their differing foreign policy approaches towards managing the present crisis, the GCC states have been unable to evolve a unified strategy to counter Iranian aggression, despite the existence of a common security framework among member states. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE have adopted a more assertive posture and a deterrence-oriented approach, Qatar and Oman have prioritised diplomacy to resolve the conflict and have tried to maintain their traditional role as regional mediators.

Kuwait, which has traditionally supported GCC unity and held a reconciliatory approach towards Iran, has avoided military retaliation. Similarly, Bahrain has remained militarily restrained but has been politically assertive in response to the Iranian attacks. Clearly, the strategic outlooks of the individual GCC countries differ, underscoring the GCC’s difficulty in adopting a consensual approach to the Iranian attack on them.

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<sup>15</sup> **“The Joint Defence Agreement of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG)”**, Ministry of Justice, State of Qatar, 13 March 2002.

<sup>16</sup> **“Gulf Cooperation Council Vision for Regional Security”**, GCC, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> **“Saudi Arabia Floats Middle Eastern Non-aggression Pact with Iran: FT”**, *Arab News*, 14 May 2026.

## **GCC’s Dilemma: Between Iran and the US**

From the outset, Iran has consistently maintained that Tehran had no fundamental dispute with the Arab Gulf countries themselves; rather, its primary concern was the presence of American military bases that could be utilised to launch attacks against Iran. This position has placed the Gulf monarchies in a difficult strategic dilemma, compelling them to balance their long-established defence and security partnerships with the United States against the risk of becoming targets of Iranian retaliation. Except for limited retaliatory actions by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, most Arab Gulf states have refrained from responding militarily to Iranian attacks, reflecting their preference for avoiding further regional escalation. They also do not want to be seen as siding with the US and Israel in the war against Iran.

This strategic dilemma is likely to persist for the Arab Gulf states even in the aftermath of the war. Their dependence on the United States as the principal guarantor of their national security and regional stability is expected to continue, thereby ensuring the continued presence of American military forces in the region. Consequently, these states are likely to remain vulnerable to being perceived by Iran as legitimate military targets in the event of any future conflict involving Iran and the USA.

Recent developments have reinforced concerns among the Gulf monarchies about Iran's reliability as a partner in any prospective regional security architecture that includes only regional actors and excludes external players. The Gulf monarchies realise that, although the US-supplied defence systems have not been able to provide absolute protection against the Iranian attacks, the US has nevertheless remained their principal security provider during the war.

Nevertheless, the continued Iranian attacks on Gulf states are likely to generate apprehension among Gulf leaders regarding the costs and risks associated with their security relationship with the United States. Although none of the Gulf rulers has publicly questioned the value of their partnership with the United States during the current crisis, the unfolding situation is expected to prompt a broader strategic re-evaluation among the Gulf monarchies. They may balance their security dependence on the United States while reducing their vulnerability to regional conflicts.

In contrast, significant trust deficits continue to characterise their relations with Iran, particularly in light of Iran’s attack on their territories and its perceived efforts to expand its influence across the region. As a result, while the GCC states may

continue to pursue diplomatic engagement with Iran, individually or collectively, they are unlikely to abandon their security partnership with the United States.

## **Conclusion**

In the present context, relations between Iran and the Arab Gulf states have become increasingly complex and uncertain. The joint US–Israel war against Iran has exposed the fragility of the Iran–GCC relations and has undermined prospects for further strengthening of their relationship. While the GCC states have displayed a considerable degree of unity in condemning Iranian attacks, the conflict has also highlighted differences among the GCC states regarding their responses to Iranian military actions, with members adopting noticeably different approaches.

At the same time, the war has prompted a serious reassessment of the Gulf states’ security relationship with the United States. While Iran has repeatedly asserted that the use of Gulf territories by the United States renders those states as legitimate targets, the Gulf monarchies remain reluctant to distance themselves from the United States. This is largely because they continue to view American security guarantees as indispensable and remain sceptical about relying solely on Iran as a partner in any future regional security architecture in the Gulf. Consequently, the regional security environment is becoming increasingly intricate and precarious. The strategic dilemmas confronting the Gulf states, combined with persistent mistrust between Iran and its Arab neighbours, are likely to have far-reaching implications for the future security and stability of the Gulf region.

## About the Author



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