

POLICY

BRIEF

NO: 10

THE GULF STATES IN THE US-ISRAEL WAR WITH IRAN: POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS AND WIDER REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Nur Köprülü

March 2026

THE GULF STATES IN THE US-ISRAEL WAR WITH IRAN: POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS AND WIDER REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Nur Köprülü

Introduction

On 28 February 2026, the US and Israel instigated a military strike against Iran, which was named 'Epic Fury' by the US administration and 'Roar of the Lion' by Israel, targeting Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. This move by the US and Israel led Iran to retaliate rapidly, launching a series of strikes with missiles and drones that culminated in a regional escalation with severe spillover effects for the Gulf states.

The US-Israel attacks, which led to the killing of high-ranking Iranian officials, including Ayatollah Khamenei, did not only remain a conflict among the US, Israel, and Iran. Rather, it swiftly spread across the region, entangling the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). US military bases in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman were attacked by Iran immediately after the onset of the 'pre-emptive strike' by the US and Israel. While some of the missiles and drones with which Iran targeted the Gulf were intercepted, some created critical damage in the region.



Abstract

The US-Israel joint strike against Iran instigated on 28 February 2026 has yet unveiled another cycle of transformation in restructuring the security and alignment patterns in the Middle East. The drastic series of changes in the geopolitical dynamics since October 7, now entered into a new era with the US-Israel war on Iran in which the critical role and manoeuvring capabilities of the Gulf states come into the fore, along with the other countries in the region. The GCC countries have been caught between this rivalry due to the US bases on their territories which have been targeted by Iran. This analysis thus aims to shed a light on the buffer position of the Gulf countries which have reverberated their shifting threat perceptions and alignment behaviour.

The attacks by Iran did not remain limited to US bases; they were also directed at energy facilities and water desalination plants in the Gulf region, which are vital to the region. Attacks on the US embassy and Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia led to the closure of the Ras Tanura refinery, which has a capacity of 550,000 barrels per day and serves as a vital export terminal for Saudi Arabia's crude oil. Drone strikes also hit other cities in the Gulf, including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha, Manama, and the commercial port of Duqm in Oman, raising concerns about energy security and economic challenges for the Middle East and the entire world.

As many have noted, the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu aims to take advantage of 'rare geopolitical opportunities' at a time when the Iran-led 'Axis of Resistance' has been weakened in the post-7 October era. Although the escalation in the region is primarily intertwined with the quest for regime change in Iran, the destabilisation and further escalation require an in-depth analysis of how events will unfold in terms of power equilibrium and the competition among regional powers seeking dominance. The series of strikes that have occurred thus far have looming and profound implications and consequences not only for the Gulf states, but also across the wider region, which has been in turmoil since 7 October.

The Build-Up to War: Behind the Scenes of Escalation

Israel's actions in targeting Iran and causing an escalation in the region, together with the US, are largely intertwined with the post-7 October geopolitical environment impacting the trajectory of the region in ways not seen since World War II. Following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Israel opened new fronts and launched military operations not only in Gaza but also in Lebanon, where it pursued the destruction of Hezbollah's capabilities and forces. With the fall of the Bath regime led by Asad in Syria, Israel carried out yet another military incursion, which extended beyond the Golan Heights, already occupied after since the 1967 Six-Day war.

The 12-day war between Iran and Israel in June 2025 was a clear illustration of regional rivalry and the ongoing circumstances that would enable Israel to maintain its dominant regional role. The US-brokered Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 by the UAE and Bahrain, and later by Morocco and Sudan, were a similarly clear indication of Israel's changing regional role following its peace-making with the Kingdom of Jordan nearly 26 years earlier. Perceptions of weakening of the Iran-led 'Axis of Resistance' across the region with all its proxies, including Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Ba'ath rule in Syria, together with the desire to expedite that process of weakening, have –perhaps for the first time in region's political history– opened unprecedented space for Israel

in the region. Thus, the pre-emptive strike launched on 28 February by the US and Israel did not occur in a geopolitical vacuum. In addition to the tremendously changed geopolitical landscape, the Gulf countries' alignment strategies and regime security perceptions need to be underscored. To date, the attacks have not achieved the collapse of the Iranian regime, although this does not mean that the possibility of regime change can be disregarded.

One of the key questions here concerns the positions and alignment strategies of the Gulf countries and Jordan. Although most of the drones originating from Iran have been intercepted, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and other looming economic challenges will deeply affect the Gulf, raising the key question of how these attacks will reshape the region and its alignments. The six GCC countries and Jordan have condemned the 'reckless' Iranian attacks on their lands. For example, a statement issued by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs 'condemns and denounces in the strongest terms the blatant Iranian aggression and the flagrant violation of the sovereignty' (Abushamala, 2026) of the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan. The six GCC countries have also stressed that the damage and cost of continuous strikes against Kuwait and Bahrain are 'dangerous acts of aggression' that imperil both security and stability of the region (Shankar, 2026).

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian subsequently offered an apology to neighbouring countries. He stated that it was deemed 'necessary to apologise

to neighbouring countries that were attacked ... We do not intend to invade neighbouring countries' (Azimi, 2026). Soon after this, however, statements from Ali Larijani of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and other top military commanders indicated that neighbouring countries must either preclude 'the US from using their territory against Iran themselves, or we will do it' (Faucon, 2026). Thus, conflicting messages emanating from Iran send mixed signals to regional countries. Some argued that these were the result of divergent approaches employed by the military and the presidency (Shankar, 2026). It can also be interpreted as strategic ambiguity, in which Iran aims to convey messages that encourage the Gulf countries to pursue strategies that create leverage against the US administration to end the ongoing escalation.

Is Gulf-led De-escalation in the Region Possible?

The Foreign Minister of Oman, Badr al-Busaidi, has said that 'the action taken by Israel and the United States against Iran was immoral and illegal' (Middle East Monitor, 2026). However, he also described Iran's retaliatory strikes against neighbouring countries as 'deeply regrettable and unacceptable', stressing the need to avoid further escalation across the region (Oman MFA, 2026). In addition, the League of Arab States held an extraordinary meeting on 8 March, initiated by Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Egypt, to discuss the Iranian attacks. By the end of the meeting, the Secretary-General of the

League, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, stated that the attacks were 'completely condemned' and constituted a 'blatant violation of international law'. He highlighted the fact that these Iranian actions are jeopardising the principles of good-neighbourliness and creating an 'unprecedented state of hostility' between Iran and its Arab neighbours (Jordan News, 2026).

The Gulf countries have clearly pursued a restrained approach to date in their response to the attacks, seeking to avoid escalation for various reasons and arguing that this is not their war. Oman and Qatar have taken on mediator roles in Geneva between the US and Iran, and between Hamas and Israel, respectively. Meanwhile, from the perspective of both Bahrain and the UAE, Iran seems to be perceived as a threat, and it is important to recall that these two countries are signatories of the Abraham Accords and have already established ties with Israel.

From Jordan's perspective, Iran is not currently regarded as an imminent threat, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ayman Safadi, has reiterated the need for de-escalation in the region (Jordan Times, 2026). Jordan has also adopted a facilitator role with diplomatic meetings and calls with Gulf countries. For Jordan, the continuous Israeli expansion into the West Bank and the closure of the Rafah border crossing are other points of concern that may have serious spillover effects on Jordan if any significant influx of Palestinians across the Jordanian border should occur.

Finally, Saudi Arabia has a central role in mitigating or navigating the escalation in the region through its realignment strategies, which can largely be traced

back to its Vision 2030 announcement, an initiative aimed at diversifying the country's large economy and fortifying regional security and stability. The US policy of retrenchment in the Middle East motivated the Saudis to take a new course of action in search of new alignments, as is evident in Saudi Arabia's visions for the 'new' Syria, the US-led Board of Peace, and the reconstruction of Gaza. Nevertheless, the decline of US involvement in the region amid the increased activities of Israel since 7 October has recently led Saudi Arabia to conclude a defence agreement with Pakistan. These steps can also be interpreted as an integral part of Kingdom's new foreign policy strategy in diversifying its security scheme which has become more striking with the war on Iran.

Conclusion

Looking to the immediate future, though it is rather difficult to predict the exact trajectory of the conflict, it is not far-fetched to assume that, should the US-Israel attacks continue, forcing Iran to retaliate further and wider, the conflict will be deepened, and additional military responses will be triggered in the region.

As a more low-key but a likely scenario, the Gulf countries could take more concrete steps toward de-escalation due to the economic hardships the war may bring. The war does not align with any of the current strategies of Gulf states, and this should not be underestimated. At the current stage, it is unlikely for the Gulf states to enter this war since the Gulf's – notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman's – standing point vis-à-vis the strikes is so clear and plausible which can be seen

in their official statements that this is 'not their war' (Ellis Petersen, 2026). In this regard, the Gulf states have been entangled with the very fact that, the presence of US bases on their soil does not provide a full security guarantee in time of a regional rivalry and on the contrary, this phenomenon can certainly drag them into a conflict that they are in fact not part of. Moreover, the escalation in the region and continuous regional pendulum would have the capacity to jeopardize the dividend advantage they have maintained during before and after post-October 7 which can also be detected in their engagement with the new regime in Syria, among other shifting alignments.

Overall, it may be too early for detailed medium-term predictions of how this war might develop, but it goes without saying that it will deeply (re)shape regional alignments. Thus, the pendulum that has been instigated in the last two weeks would unpack new conceptual debates on Gulf's foreign policy strategies that, in fact, go beyond balancing and band-wagoning which have dominated the IR discipline by bringing up new perspectives on foreign policy behaviour through 'hedging'. Employing hedging as a foreign policy strategy means managing the risks rather than focusing on threats (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). Having said that, the changing security and threat perceptions with the US-Israel joint strike may also lead to contingent hedging behaviours by the Gulf States, if not transient.

References

Abushamala, R. (2026), Gulf countries, Jordan condemn 'Iranian' attacks on regional countries, Anadolu Ajansi, 28 February, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/gulf-countries-jordan-condemn-iranian-attacks-on-regional-countries/3843729>

Azimi, A. (2026). Why did Iranian President Apologize?, BBC News, 7 March, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz7g2qrz8vdo>

Bakir, A. & Al-Shamari, N. (2025). The art of hedging: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE manoeuvres amid US-China great power competition, *Third World Quarterly*, 46:7, 773-794.

Ellis-Petersen, H. (2026). 'Worst nightmare': anger and frustration as Gulf states bear brunt of war they did not start, 14 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/14/gulf-strait-of-hormuz-nightmare-anger-frustration-at-us>

Faucon, B. (2026). De Facto Wartime Leader Steers Iran's Defiant Response to U.S., *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 March, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/de-facto-wartime-leader-steers-irans-defiant-response-to-u-s-f8fe0680>

Jordan News (2026). Safadi Participates in the Ministerial-Level Meeting of the Arab League Council, 8 March, <https://www.jordannews.jo/Section-109/News/Safadi-Participates-in-the-Ministerial-Level-Meeting-of-the-Arab-League-Council-49493>

Jordan Times (2026). Safadi, Egyptian counterpart discuss regional escalation, diplomatic de-escalation, 15 March, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/safadi-egyptian-counterpart-discuss-regional-escalation-diplomatic-de-escalation>

Middle East Monitor (2026). Oman condemns US-Israeli war on Iran as 'immoral and illegal', 9 March, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260309-oman-condemns-us-israeli-war-on-iran-as-immoral-and-illegal/>

Oman MFA, Oman at ministerial meeting of the Arab League Council, 8 March, <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/38811/>

Shankar, P. (2026). Why are Iranian leaders sending mixed messages on Gulf attacks?, *Al Jazeera*, 8 March, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/8/why-are-iranian-leaders-sending-mixed-messages-on-gulf-attacks>

Nur Köprülü



Prof. Dr. Nur Köprülü completed her PhD at the Middle East Technical University (METU-Ankara) with a dissertation entitled “Consolidating the National Identity of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.” She is currently the Head of the Department of Political Science at Near East University. Her research primarily focuses on Middle East politics and the democratization processes in Arab countries following the 2011 Arab Spring. Köprülü’s work examines the consolidation of monarchical regimes and the dynamics of democratization and political opposition in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

She has published in peer-reviewed journals, including Middle East Policy, Middle Eastern Studies, and the British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. In recent research, Köprülü has explored regime types and the factors shaping state-society relations in the MENA region. Her current work focuses on the evolving political dynamics in the region in the aftermath of the October 7 era.



Global Academy is a learning and research center whose contributors collaborate with non-profit volunteer productions and project-specific studies. Perfection at the international level is achieved through sharing and discussing all information, ideas, comments, and analyses.

Global Academy was founded by a group of researchers and academicians to conduct independent, objective, science-based, and in-depth research. Academic excellence is its aim. This is achieved through various channels. First, by producing simple and comprehensible data, providing consultancy and solution partnership to the people and institutions who need them. Second, performing, broadcasting, and publishing educational activities directed to the enlightenment of the public. Third, providing professional remarks to decision-makers and private sector institutions at national and international levels. Lastly, establishing a general framework for understanding, explicating, and finding solutions to the global problems encountered by humanity.

   /TRGlobalAcademy
www.globacademy.org