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GCC Joint Defense in the Shadow of the US
Indifference

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Since the Israeli aggression on Qatar on September 9 2025, a central question has been raised on whether this attack represents a real opportunity for GCC decision makers to transform the GCC into a defense alliance. Meanwhile, questions were also raised with respect to the challenges and limitations that face such a prospect, specifically considering the failure of previous attempts to expand and strengthen the role of the GCC as a regional organization or alliance.

On Thursday, September 18, GCC states called for a meeting of the joint Defense Council and Higher Military Committee. The committee assessed the defense posture of the member states and the growing threats posed by the Israeli aggression, expressing the decision to activate the joint defense mechanisms and Gulf deterrence capabilities. According to the GCC Secretary General, Jasem Albudaiwi, the Joint Defense Council approved a set of measures “increasing intelligence information exchange through the Unified Military Command, sharing aerial situational awareness across all operations centers in GCC countries, accelerating the work of the GCC joint task force for the early warning system against ballistic missiles, updating joint defense plans in coordination between the Unified Military Command and the Operations and Training Committee of the GCC, and conducting joint exercises between air operations and air defense centers over the next three months, followed by a joint live air drill.”²

¹ All articles published under “Gulf Insights” series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

² “GCC Joint Defense Council Condemns Israeli Attack on Qatar, Approves Defensive Measures,” *The Peninsula Qatar*, September 18, 2025, accessed September 19, 2025,

Given the inconsistent nature of GCC politics, it would be very difficult to make predictions related to the future of the GCC based on the outcomes of this meeting alone. The unpredictability of GCC politics pertains to a number of factors. First, there are historical and persistent rivalries among Gulf States and a long history of mistrust, especially concerns about Saudi Arabia's repeated attempts to dominate the region and impose its political will and foreign policy agenda on its neighbors.³

Secondly, GCC states do not share the same perceptions of regional threats. For example, while Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as its primary regional rival and as the major source of threat to its interests, other GCC states such as Oman, Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar do not share this perception. At the same time, since the Abraham Accords in 2021, the UAE no longer considers Israel a direct threat, and other GCC countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have appeared to adopt a similar position toward normalizing relations with Israel.⁴

Interestingly, GCC states have been emphasizing the use of the term "Joint Defense" in all relevant media communications since the aggression on Doha, which seems to serve multiple political purposes. To begin with, all GCC member states unanimously agreed that the meeting was an expression for their willingness and determination to assess their defense capabilities considering diminishing US commitment to Gulf security and inconsistent US foreign policy in

<https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/18/09/2025/gcc-joint-defense-council-condemns-israeli-attack-on-qatar-approves-defensive-measures>.

³ A. Shahbaz & A. Hassaniyan, "The Growing Autonomy for GCC States' Foreign Policy and Structural Changes in the Balance of Power in the Region," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2025.2480007>.

⁴ F. Dazi-Heni, "The Gulf States and Israel after the Abraham Accords," *Arab Reform Initiative*, accessed September 19, 2025, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-gulf-states-and-israel-after-the-abraham-accords/?tztc=1>.

the Middle East. This diminishing commitment by the US was manifested in a number of situations such as the ambivalent response to the Houthi attacks on Saudi Aramco in 2019 and Abu Dhabi in 2022, and most recently, the Israeli aggression on Doha. For several GCC countries, the intense engagement of the US with Iran over Iran's nuclear file in 2015 without involving any of the GCC states was perceived as a serious shift in US commitment to the region's security.⁵

The perceptions and behaviors of the GCC States and their decision to launch a series of defense measures collectively as a unified body are in line with the context of the regional security complex as seen from a number of indicators. First, GCC States decided to act together and to mobilize external support in a defensive move against a threat targeting the entire region, specifically from Israel and Iran. Secondly, irrespective of whether or not the GCC states create a formal security alliance, their statements and actions reflect a shift toward establishing a balance of power vis-à-vis Iran. In this context, While the Israeli attacks on Qatar may contribute to the development of a security and defense arrangement in the Gulf region in one way or another, it is also likely to create new challenges with the potential to contribute to new forms of instability. For example, Saudi Arabia's announcement of a defense agreement with Pakistan may entice other GCC members to follow suit, but it may also raise concerns and trigger adverse reactions from the US as well as from other regional powers, especially given the strategic ties between Pakistan and China. Hence, the future of collective security and defense in the Gulf is likely to remain a long and difficult process that will probably be flawed by intense levels of uncertainty.

⁵ A. Alnassar, "Security Factors behind the Decline in US-Gulf States Relations," Open Journal of Political Science, January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2024.141002>.

About the author

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About the Gulf Insights series

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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