



Gulf Insights

GCC responses to the US-Israeli war on Iran:
between fear of entrapment and restoring
deterrence

No. 104

March 2026

Saban Kardas



GCC responses to the US-Israeli war on Iran: between fear of entrapment and restoring deterrence¹

Saban Kardas

Since the start of the Israeli-US campaign against Iran on 28 February 2026, the reaction coming from the GCC countries directly targeted by Iran has been cautious. As they have activated defensive measures, their response so far remained limited to shooting down the incoming Iranian missiles or drones, and [reporting with the UN agencies](#) their right to respond in kind under the UN Charter. The continuation of Iranian aggression and escalation and expansion toward even civilian targets, including oil and gas infrastructure, embassies, airports, hotels or industrial zones, put enormous strain on this policy of restraint, raising expectations for a broader response. Nonetheless, so far they remained reluctant to join the US-Israel coalition to mount a larger response, which appears to [defy the latter's expectations](#).

The Gulf's restrained reaction to the Iranian aggression is largely grounded in a number of factors, most notably fear of entrapment. As the theoretical discussions [on alliance security dilemma](#) have long argued, two twin obstacles to any successful alliance are fear of abandonment and fear of entrapment. While the abandonment is usually attributed to smaller allies fears

of being left unprotected when push comes to shove, the entrapment is associated with stronger party's concerns about being dragged into junior allies' conflicts over the latter's reckless actions. As the United States is acting as the unpredictable and reckless ally, it is ironically the [smaller Gulf allies](#) that are now more worried about the fear of entanglement.

Firstly, this policy is to a certain extent the result of the Gulf countries' *discomfort with the legal and political bases of the operation*. [Various shifting narratives](#) offered by the Trump administration to make a case for 'potential' preemptive attack lack solid legal basis and claims about the Iranian nuclear program have been countered by international bodies including [the International Atomic Energy Agency](#). Since last summer, the [GCC nations have done everything at their disposal](#) to expand the window of a diplomatic solution and avert the Israeli-U.S. drive towards war, including through mediation services or direct engagement with the Trump administration. However, they had to endure the manner in which Israel managed to drag the United States into this conflict, in blatant disregard and

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.

contravention of their core interests, which was most vividly illustrated in how the Omani Foreign Minister's [remarks about the feasibility of reaching a deal](#) were overrun at the onset of the decapitation attacks. The Gulf is understandably unhappy about being part of a conflict, which lacks clear legal and political justification, and in which strategically they see more risks than opportunities.

Second, and related to the first factor, is the *lack of clarity about the U.S. objectives in the conflict*. The initiation of the conflict through a decapitation operation already generated more questions than answered, as regards the ends and means of the U.S. operational planning. The operation's [stated objectives](#) moved beyond the elimination of Iran's nuclear program to encompass dismantling of Iranian missile program and a maximalist regime change agenda. There is already talk about arming the opposition or supporting the Kurdish groups to initiate an insurgency inside Iran. However, all the [arithmetic](#) regarding Iran's missile/drone production vs. interception capacity raises questions about the [sustainability of this campaign militarily](#) in case of a [protracted war of attrition](#). Add to this the [political calculus](#): the operation is likely to suffer from fickle decision-making and blowback effect of U.S. domestic politics down the way. Lack of a clear endgame matched with capabilities undermines credibility in the eyes of potential 'allies', who are already

wary of being overrun in the run up to the operation and excluded from decision-making.

Thirdly, the chronic *problems bedeviling the Gulf unity* for decades are definitely taking their toll on the response of individual countries. There had been minimal prior work toward building 'collective defense' capabilities and policies needed to respond to the Iranian attacks on the hard and soft targets, such as integrated air defense platforms. For reasons which have been widely analyzed for years, not only did the Gulf unity remain an enigma but also the threats from fellow Gulf nations surpassed the external threats, which was most dramatically observed during the 2017 blockade. Definitely, the securitization of the region after the October 2023 gave renewed impetus for intra-GCC cooperation in the security realm, which culminated in the [GCC Vision for Regional Security in 2024](#). Even after the Iranian and Israeli attacks on Doha in 2025, however, messages of solidarity were soon eclipsed by the outbreak of intra-GCC rifts, as the two most powerful players Riyadh and Abu Dhabi came to loggerheads over Yemen. After the outbreak of conflict on, the Ministerial Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held an extraordinary meeting regarding the Iranian aggression and [issued a joint declaration](#) to condemn "the treacherous Iranian attacks" and expressed support under the GCC Charter and the Joint Defence

Agreement. However, short of [collective defense planning](#), the GCC is hardly a force-multiplier that can pool its members' capabilities as an effective deterrent.

The fourth and possibly the most important factor driving GCC aversion to support the US/Israeli campaign against Iran is *the fear of entrapment* that is very much reflected in [the ongoing discussions](#) taking place among the Gulf experts and strategic thinkers. The Gulf nations simply [do not want to be part of an indefinite conflict](#) that has been initiated despite their objections. There seem to be several interrelated narratives feeding this fear of entrapment. On the one hand, they do not want to be embroiled in others' wars, for which they may be paying an undue price on the frontlines. The Iranian attacks already are taking a heavy toll, with the disruption of civilian aviation, tourism, oil and gas production, and exports, not to mention tarnishing the image of the Gulf as a safe haven. Believing that further escalation will only increase the costs, they are more invested in de-escalatory steps to resolve the conflict sooner than later. On the other hand, there are deep-seated fears of a deliberate trap set up by Israel intended to draw them into this mayhem and fight its own fight. Indeed, coming against the background of an overtly expansionist and revisionist Israeli conduct in the region since October 2023 and the leverage Tel Aviv exercises over Washington, [concerns](#)

[about paving the way for an Israeli dominated regional order](#) are widely shared. Meanwhile, the fear of abandonment, the other side of the alliance security dilemma, also needs to be taken into account. As Iran's attacks on the Gulf so far exceeded its strikes on Israel, concerns grow over not only [to what extent Washington is committed to their defense](#) but also how soon they will replenish the declining weapons stockpiles. Considering even that the United States did not seem to be [prepared for Tehran to lash out against the GCC nations](#), the feeling of being left alone is very much alive. The Gulf countries also realize that even after the guns go silent, they will still continue to [share the same geography with Iran](#), and cannot afford deepening enmities as a result of reckless Israeli/American policies. Together, these overlapping narratives are deepening the fear of abandonment, which sets a major obstacle to any further cooperation with the US-led coalition.

The Gulf countries are walking the tightrope as the conflict continues without any resolution in sight. As much as this is '[not the Gulf's war](#), [they are at war](#) and it has imposed bitter strategic decisions. However unjustified the US-Israeli decision to initiate the conflict, it cannot be overlooked how a trigger-ready Tehran made its choices to settle its scores at Gulf's expense and on Gulf soil. This is largely because of the rapid erosion of the entire system of the old deterrence model since October 2023,

and its [total collapse in the twelve-day war of 2025](#). With the collapse of the previous deterrence model predicated largely on external security provision gone, [Gulf states have to assume larger roles](#) to reassert deterrence, as it is their vital interests, security and autonomy that is at stake. So far, they kept their response in the realm of legitimate self-defense, signaling to escalate toward offensive retaliatory actions only as a last resort. In an unjust war initiated against their will, the GCC nations are even exercising their legitimate right of self-defense in a restrained manner, due largely to the fear of entrapment. However, Iran's probing of limits beyond these boundaries will inevitably force the Gulf countries to revisit the balance between deterrence and fear of entrapment.

About the author

Saban Kardas is a Research Professor and Program Coordinator at the Gulf Studies Center at the College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University.

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.

All articles published under "Gulf Insight" 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.