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The Socio-Political Dimensions of War in the Gulf

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Public discussions of war in the Gulf often focus on common themes such as missile trajectories, deterrence, military balances, energy security, the strategic calculations of state actors, and the risks surrounding the Strait of Hormuz. As important as these issues may be, they are not the only lens through which the region is understood. The Gulf region is not only a strategic theater, an energy corridor, or a military map but it is also a social space inhabited by communities that have deep roots in history, memories, anxieties, expectations, and different understandings of security. Hence, beyond its geopolitical dimension, the current war should also be understood as a social and political event.

War does not only threaten lives, safety and property, but it can also impact everyday life, reshape public consciousness, affect the relationship between state and society, and alter how people imagine their future. The implications of war go far beyond the concept of hard security to what scholars describe as societal security and resilience, referring to the capacity of societies to preserve cohesion, order, and psychological stability under pressure.²

For individuals, war becomes a lived reality the moment it evolves from being an abstract headline on the news or social media to become explosions within earshot, emergency alerts on phones, or drones spotted flying low overhead. This is the moment the crisis is no longer external,

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.

²Buzan, B., Waever, O. & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

but immediate and personal. This is when daily questions begin to carry strategic weight: should I go to work today? Is it safe to send my children to school? Is travel still safe? Is my home safe? As minor and slight these questions may sound from the perspective of formal policy, in reality, they mark the moment when war moves from the realm of state strategy into the realm of social experience. This shift is significant because the endurance of societies does not only depend on air defense systems and military readiness, but also on the ability of societies to absorb shock without slipping into fear, spread of rumors, paralysis, or fragmentation. It is at this moment that the management of collective fear, the regulation of information, the continuity of basic services, and the credibility of state institutions become central to crisis management. Hence, war does not only test and challenge the military capabilities of a state, but also its political and social fabric.

In the Gulf, one of the most important factors shaping how societies respond to war is collective memory. Societies interpret new dangers through previous experiences. Many imagine the Gulf as a relatively stable zone, but the modern history of this region has known its share of repeated moments of insecurity such as the Iran-Iraq war and the Tanker War in the 1980s,³ Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the US invasion of Iraq and the instability that followed, the attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE during the Yemen conflict, and the 2017-2021 blockade on Qatar. While these events all resulted in strategic lessons on the state level, on the societal and individual levels they produced emotional and social repertoires that continue to influence how people perceive and interpret danger, and how they behave under stress.

Across the Gulf region, these memories are not identical, and in each country, these memories trigger different emotions and responses. Kuwait, for example, carries the memory of

³ Lee, E. (2024). Red Sea tensions, Tanker War lessons? *Global Politics & Strategy*, 66(2), 115-126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2332064>.

direct invasion and occupation, which naturally heightens sensitivity to regional escalation. Qatar's recent memory, on the other hand, is shaped by indirect threat, cyberattacks, disinformation, and pressures of isolation that accompanied the blockade. That experience reinforced a different type of preparedness that centered on logistical adaptation, institutional coordination, and food-security planning. Then, there is a broader Gulf consciousness shaped by regional interdependence, shared vulnerabilities, and the growing idea of a common Gulf destiny. This awareness does not erase or replace national distinctions, but it creates overlapping political emotions across the region.

At the same time, social responses to war in the Gulf cannot be understood through the experiences of citizens alone. Gulf societies are very diverse demographically, with millions of residents from across the Arab world, and other parts of the world. Regardless of the nature of their legal status, many are deeply embedded in the social and economic life of the region, and their presence makes collective memories and national responses far more complex and diverse because they do not all experience crisis in the same way. Some express deep solidarity with the host society and feel that their own stability is inseparable from the country's stability. Others respond with a more practical form of anxiety shaped by work insecurity, flight disruptions, school closures, and uncertainty about family mobility. Others who come from war-affected regions such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq or Palestine, may interpret events through prior personal experiences of conflict and displacement.

This diversity implies that the social consequences of war in the Gulf are experienced across populations with different memories, expectations, and thresholds of fear and anxiety. Any serious analysis of crisis management in the region therefore needs to account for this complex demographic reality, and the understanding of social cohesion in the region is not limited to citizen-

state relations, but should also include how non-citizen populations understand risk, trust institutions, and locate themselves within the crisis.

Within this complex scene, the information environment becomes specifically important. At times of war, there are struggles over territory and deterrence, but there are also major struggles over narratives. Rumors, manipulated content, doctored videos, anonymous accounts, fakes and deepfakes, sensational commentary, and performative outrage all circulate rapidly online, even faster than official information. Research on misinformation and disinformation consistently shows that when digitally networked environments are not managed effectively, they tend to amplify confusion, accelerate emotional responses, and undermine trust. In the Gulf, social stability is treated as a core security concern, and this makes information management a form of societal protection, not just a matter of media control.⁴

This is exactly why Gulf states have repeatedly emphasized the importance of directing the public toward official sources, and why they have vigorously discouraged the circulation of rumors, even to the point of criminalizing some forms of false or harmful wartime content. While these policies may be controversial on some levels, they are based on the strong conviction that a society overwhelmed by conflicting narratives is harder to reassure, harder to coordinate, and more vulnerable to panic.

At the same time information discipline may not be enough, as social resilience also depends on whether daily life remains functional. The continuity of government services, digital infrastructure, schools, delivery networks, healthcare access, and food supply chain can be as important to public morale as military actions and announcements. When basic systems remain

⁴ Broda, E. & Stromback, J. (2024). Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news: Lessons from an interdisciplinary, systematic literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(2), 139-166.

operational, people immediately receive a powerful message that the state is still present and capable, and this reduces uncertainty and helps contain the psychological impact of war. In this sense, resilience is both an abstract concept as well as an actual experience that is lived through interaction with functioning institutions and the persistence of ordinary routines.⁵

Another important issue that is brought to the surface by the current war is the uneven nature of vulnerability. The elderly, children, people with disabilities, and individuals with specific medical or psychological needs do not experience crisis in the same way others do, and are often more deeply affected by disruption, fear or confinement. Hence, security policy must be understood in broader terms that extend beyond military and procedural language to include psychological, social, and health security as part of national preparedness.

At the societal level, crisis response also highlights the centrality of trust in the relationship between state and society. People tend to comply much better and with minimal resistance or reluctance to emergency measures when they believe that state institutions are competent, responsive, and attentive. In Qatar, public warning systems, mobile alerts and citizen reporting mechanisms reflect a form of interactive crisis governance in which the state depends on public cooperation. This is crucial because social resilience does not really require the absence of fear but the ability of institutions to remain credible, trustable, and reliable to organize and contain fear.

Another one of the unavoidable effects of war is the expansion of public debate, even among those who usually avoid politics. Moments of regional crisis quickly provoke discussions about neutrality, alliance structures, military bases, regional autonomy, and long-term costs of entanglement. In the Gulf, some currently believe that preserving the region's interests requires

⁵ Bourbeau, P. (2018). *On Resilience: Genealogy, Logics & World Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

avoiding any direct involvement in wars driven by regional and international rivalries. Others argue that no matter what Gulf states do, conflict is inevitable, especially that it is part of older regional and global struggles and conflicts. Amid all this emerges the debate on western military bases in the region and whether they are indispensable deterrents or actually responsible for increasing exposure by making host countries potential targets. These questions and debates may sound natural in response to war and fear, but they also point to much bigger issues concerning the future of Gulf security.

The bottom line is that wars in the Gulf cannot be measured merely by missiles intercepted, oil flows protected, or markets reassured. War has a much deeper impact in reshaping the social meaning of security. It influences how people trust institutions, how communities manage fear, how states communicate their authority, how residents and citizens imagine belonging to the state, and how public debate raises questions about order and security.

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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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