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# Caught Between, Embedded Within Gulf Hedging in an Interlocking Regional Order

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## **Abstract**

Gulf hedging reflects a structured and layered approach to navigating a regional environment defined by overlapping rivalries, asymmetries of power and deep interdependence. Rather than operating as a flexible strategy, it unfolds within an interlocking architecture of relationships in which rivalry, cooperation and engagement coexist. This embeds the Arab states in the Gulf within the very tensions they seek to manage.

The 2026 US-Israel confrontation with Iran brings these dynamics into sharper relief. The Gulf states' direct exposure to conflict reveals how relationships that provide deterrence can also generate vulnerability, narrowing their room for manoeuvre. While reliance on external security guarantees remains central, continued engagement across competing actors reflects efforts to contain escalation rather than resolve it.

Gulf hedging, therefore, persists not as an optimal or fully autonomous strategy, but as a constrained necessity. It does not remove the Gulf from conflict. It enables it to endure within it.

## Introduction

The US-Israel strikes on Iran, which began in February 2026, and Tehran's subsequent missile and drone retaliation across the Gulf mark a significant intensification of long-standing regional tensions. What has emerged is not simply an episode of crisis, but a manifestation of deeper structural dynamics that have long shaped the Gulf region's strategic environment. Iranian responses targeted Israel as well as the Gulf Arab states that host US military facilities, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>1</sup> For the Gulf, the prospect of being drawn into direct confrontation between Washington and Tehran has long been recognised as one of the most destabilising possibilities in the regional security landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Diplomatic efforts in the immediate lead-up to the strikes sought to avert such an outcome. Negotiations between the United States and Iran, facilitated by Oman, represented a final attempt to stabilise relations and contain rising tensions.<sup>3</sup> The talks failed to produce an agreement, and military action followed. The operation targeted senior Iranian political and military leaders and resulted in the deaths of numerous high-ranking figures, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The scale of the leadership decapitation marked one of the most consequential escalatory moves in the history of US-Iran confrontation.

Washington's Gulf allies have borne the immediate consequences of Iran's retaliation. While the initial strikes focused on military facilities, including American assets in Bahrain, subsequent attacks appear to have expanded into airports, ports, energy sites and urban areas. Air defence systems intercepted many Iranian missiles and drones, yet vulnerabilities were exposed. Temporary airspace closures, flight disruptions, and early indications of tanker rerouting from the Strait of Hormuz highlighted how quickly economic disruption can follow.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News, "Why Did US and Israel Attack Iran and How Long Could the War Last?" BBC News, 23 April 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2dyz6p3weo>; BBC News, "Watch: How US-Israel Strikes on Iran Unfolded... in Two Minutes", video produced by Amy Walker, BBC, 1 March 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/videos/clyv5rnd8r0o>; *The Guardian*, "US and Israel Launch Strikes on Iran: What We Know So Far", 28 February 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/28/us-israel-launch-strikes-attack-iran-what-we-know-so-far-latest>; Priyanka Shankar, "Who Are Iran's Senior Figures Killed in US-Israeli Attacks?", Al Jazeera, 1 March 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/1/who-are-irans-senior-figures-killed-in-us-israeli-attacks>

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, the term "the Gulf states" is used for convenience to refer to the Gulf Arab monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, primarily those most deeply integrated into the United States' regional security architecture.

<sup>3</sup> Parisa Hafezi and Olivia Le Poidevin, "US-Iran Talks End with No Deal but Potential Signs of Progress", Reuters, 26 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-iran-nuclear-talks-resume-geneva-against-backdrop-military-threat-2026-02-26/>

<sup>4</sup> Frank Gardner, "Allies of US in the Gulf Bear Brunt of Iran Attacks", BBC News, 1 March 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1jk922dgjgo>; "America's Gulf Allies Face a Moment of Great Peril", *The Economist*, 28 February 2026; Al Jazeera, "Multiple Arab States That Host US Assets Targeted in Iran Retaliation", 28 February 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/28/multiple-gulf-arab-states-that-host-us-assets-targeted-in-iran-retaliation>; "Iran's Strikes on Gulf States May Widen War Against Tehran, Analysts

Although the Gulf states are not direct parties to the war, they remain deeply embedded in the United States' regional military architecture, hosting operational assets and integrating closely with American defence systems. This integration, long viewed as a pillar of deterrence, simultaneously exposes them to the dynamics of escalation.

At the same time, the Gulf's position in this confrontation cannot be reduced to alignment with Washington alone. While reliant on American security guarantees, key Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have in recent years resumed engagement with Iran, while Qatar and Oman have sustained dialogue with Iran throughout periods of regional tension. Economic interdependence, particularly between the UAE and Iran, has endured despite political rivalry. This parallel pursuit of deterrence and engagement reflects a calibrated hedging strategy. However, rather than representing a flexible or fully autonomous choice, this strategy is shaped by structural constraints in which the Gulf states are simultaneously embedded within, rather than positioned between, competing regional rivalries.

Gulf officials themselves have characterised the escalation as an "existential threat", warning of its implications for their sovereignty, regional security and international order.<sup>5</sup> These assessments underscore the scale of the challenge facing the Gulf states, whose exposure to the conflict reflects not direct participation, but the structural entanglements created by their overlapping external relationships.

It is in response to such conditions that states adopt what is described as hedging: a strategy of managing uncertainty through parallel and sometimes conflicting policies, combining alignment, engagement and diversification. This lens is particularly useful in the Gulf, where states simultaneously rely on the United States for security while maintaining engagement with Iran and expanding ties with other actors, reflecting a strategy shaped less by clear alignment than by the need to navigate overlapping and independent pressures.

Against this backdrop, the central question, therefore, is whether the Gulf states' long-standing strategy of calibrated hedging remains viable in the context of a regional war between major powers, or whether the conflict exposes structural limits that constrain the practice of hedging itself, narrowing the Gulf states' ability to manage relations simultaneously with the United States, Israel and Iran.

This paper examines the historical and contemporary evolution of the Gulf states' hedging strategies through an analysis of the multiple dimensions of their external relations and the logic underpinning these interactions. Conceptualising hedging as a constrained strategy operating within a structured and interlocking system of regional and external rivalries, it argues that the Gulf is not just positioned between competing powers but embedded within their interactions. Against this

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Say", *The Straits Times*, 3 March 2026, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/irans-strikes-on-gulf-states-may-widen-war-against-tehran-analysts-say>

<sup>5</sup> Emma Farge, "Iranian Strikes Pose Existential Threat, Gulf States Tell UN", Reuters, 25 March 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-strikes-pose-existential-threat-gulf-states-tell-un-2026-03-25/>

backdrop, the paper assesses whether the 2026 war tests the limits of hedging or confirms the resilience of this strategy over the medium to longer term.

## The Logic of Gulf Hedging

Within the field of international relations, the concept of “hedging” builds on earlier understandings of alliance behaviour, in which states may balance against threats or align with strong powers depending on their strategic environment.<sup>6</sup> However, hedging is analytically distinct in its emphasis on ambiguity, flexibility and risk mitigation rather than commitment to a single alignment. It is typically employed under conditions of uncertainty, where the costs of choosing sides are high and future power dynamics remain unclear.<sup>7</sup> In such contexts, states pursue parallel and sometimes contradictory policies – combining engagement, limited alignment and diversification – to manage risks while preserving autonomy.

This paper uses the term “Gulf hedging” as an analytical shorthand to explain the underlying logic through which individual Gulf states navigate competing external pressures. It refers to the parallel, though not identical, strategies adopted by these states in managing relationships with major powers, particularly the United States, Iran and, increasingly, Israel. Scholarship on the Gulf has treated hedging as a context-dependent risk-management strategy rather than a uniform or fully coordinated regional posture.<sup>8</sup> While the Gulf states vary in the form and intensity of their external alignments, many have pursued a broadly similar combination of security alignment, diplomatic engagement and selective diversification in order to navigate a regional environment defined by overlapping rivalries and interdependence. This pattern reflects a wider transformation in the regional order of the Middle East, where alliances have become increasingly fluid, non-exclusive and issue-specific, forming what has been described as “liquid alliances” rather than fixed strategic blocs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For conceptual discussions of hedging in international relations, see John D. Ciorciari and Jürgen Haacke, “Hedging in International Relations: An Introduction”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (September 2019): 367–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz017>; David Martin Jones and Nicole Jenne, “Hedging and Grand Strategy in Southeast Asian Foreign Policy”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 2 (May 2022): 205–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab00>; F. Figiaconi, “Choosing Not to Choose: Hedging as a Category of Neutrality”, *European Journal of International Security* (2025): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10009>

<sup>7</sup> Ali Bakir and Nayef Al-Shamari, “The Art of Hedging: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE Manoeuvres amid US–China Great Power Competition”, *Third World Quarterly* 46, no. 7 (2025): 773–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2509574>

<sup>8</sup> James M. Dorsey, “Gulf Alliances: Regional States Hedge Their Bets”, RSIS Commentary no. 074, 31 March 2015, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CO15074.pdf>; Yoel Guzansky, “The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf”, *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (2015): 112–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12117>; Ali Bakir and Noor Al-Shamari, “The Art of Hedging”.

<sup>9</sup> Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Eduard Soler i Lecha, “Regionalism and Alliances in the Middle East, 2011–2021: From a ‘Flash in the Pan’ of Regional Cooperation to Liquid Alliances”, *Geopolitics* 29, no. 4 (2024): 1447–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2268542>

The contemporary logic of Gulf hedging stems from a historic pattern of managing external power rivalry. This reflects a deeper structural condition of the Gulf regional system, in which transformations have historically been driven not solely by internal dynamics but by forces emanating from the wider international system.<sup>10</sup> In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Persian Gulf was defined by intersecting imperial interests. As Britain expanded its naval presence, the Ottoman Empire retained influence on land, producing a system of dual authority that frequently clashed. The Gulf's integration into global trade intensified geopolitical competition and attracted various foreign powers. Rather than direct control, the empires established by these powers depended on local intermediaries, often aligning with Gulf rulers to preserve their interests, resulting in layered, indirect authority. Importantly, Gulf rulers were not passive; they actively pursued external protection and leveraged imperial power to advance their territorial and dynastic ambitions, demonstrating strategic agency amid asymmetry.<sup>11</sup>

Historical accounts of Kuwait and Qatar illustrate this pattern, where ruling families negotiated with both Ottoman and British authorities to secure protection while preserving their autonomy. In some cases, rulers accepted nominal Ottoman sovereignty – such as raising Ottoman flags – while avoiding substantive obligations like taxation, reflecting a calibrated approach to external alignment.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the Al-Thani rulers of Qatar engaged both the Ottoman Empire and Britain to counter regional rivals while maintaining autonomy.<sup>13</sup> Such dual engagement reflects patterns of selective alignment and strategic flexibility consistent with what is now conceptualised as hedging. Although often associated with the contemporary US-led security order, the underlying logic of Gulf hedging thus reflects a long historical pattern. Gulf polities have historically navigated external powers through selective alignment, accommodation and autonomy preservation, from earlier imperial engagements to modern security arrangements. Contemporary hedging can therefore be understood as an evolution of these practices rather than a wholly new strategic response.

Within this context, cooperation and threat coexist within the same relationships. Major actors may function as partners and potential sources of risk. Security alignment provides some deterrence, while engagement helps mitigate tensions, but neither eliminates exposure to the dynamics of escalation. Hedging, therefore, reflects not indecision but a deliberate strategy to manage uncertainty in a

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<sup>10</sup> Howard M. Hensel, ed., *Security Dynamics in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities* (Routledge, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003298458>, 45–47.

<sup>11</sup> Aiza Khan, “The Ottomans in the Arabian Peninsula”, 13; Allen James Fromherz, “The Persian Gulf in the Pre-Protectorate Period, 1790–1853”, 17, 22; W. Taylor Fain, “Britain’s Presence in the Persian Gulf, 1617–2019”, 37, all in *Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> M. Al-Kuwari, “The Grand Bargains and the Emergence of Ruling Families”, in *Tribal Reawakening and the Future of State-Building in Kuwait and Qatar*, Gulf Studies 20 (Springer, 2025), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-9663-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-9663-2_2)

<sup>13</sup> Biral Bilal Emre, “The British Threat to the Ottoman Presence in the Persian Gulf during the Era of Abdülhamid II and the Responses Towards It”, Dissertation, Middle East Technical University (Turkey), 2009.

complex and interconnected regional order, allowing states to sustain stability while avoiding the risks of premature alignment.

Understanding this condition requires moving beyond treating Gulf hedging as a singular or static policy. Rather than a set of isolated choices, it is more usefully understood as a layered strategy operating across multiple, interdependent domains and relationships. This reflects a broader pattern in which the Gulf states navigate interlocking pressures across different domains, balancing security, economic and diplomatic considerations within a constrained strategic environment.

## The Five-Dimensional Architecture of Gulf Hedging

The Gulf region sits at the intersection of multiple tensions, alliances and dependencies that underpin the Gulf states' hedging posture. This insecurity is not simply a product of external threats but is also rooted within a security architecture that itself perpetuates instability.<sup>14</sup> For the Gulf states, hedging is a structural necessity, driven by the need to navigate simultaneous and often contradictory pressures from external relationships.

Rather than operating within a linear balance of power, Gulf security is shaped by an interconnected system where military, political and ideological dynamics intersect. Within this environment, relationships are rarely defined in singular terms of alliance or rivalry. Instead, cooperation, competition and interdependence coexist, generating a self-reinforcing security dilemma. In this context, Gulf hedging can be understood as operating across multiple, overlapping domains of interaction.

James A. Bill described the Gulf system as a “rectangle of tension”, capturing the interaction between the regional actors and external power.<sup>15</sup> While this formulation reflected the strategic dynamics of an earlier period, the contemporary landscape has become more complex. In particular, the gradual incorporation of Israel into Gulf regional interactions has introduced an additional layer to the region's political, economic and security dynamics, expanding the scope and intensity of these interlocking relationships.

Gulf hedging can therefore be understood across five interrelated dimensions: (1) the US-Gulf partnership, (2) relations between the Gulf Arab states and Iran, (3) the evolving relations between the Gulf Arab states and Israel, (4) the Iran-Israel rivalry, and (5) the US-Iran antagonism. Within this evolving environment, Gulf hedging emerges as a strategy for navigating these overlapping pressures. While the close strategic alignment between the United States and Israel remains an important feature of the regional environment, it operates primarily as a background structural condition

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<sup>14</sup> Mehran Kamrava, “Introduction”, in *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Cornell University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7591/j.ctt1w0dcd1.5>

<sup>15</sup> Bill, “The Geometry of Instability in the Gulf: The Rectangle of Tension”, in *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability*, 2nd impression, ed. Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014), 101

rather than a distinct Gulf-centred relationship and is therefore not treated as a separate dimension of Gulf hedging.

## 1. The US-Gulf Partnership

The US-Gulf partnership constitutes the first dimension of Gulf hedging and forms the core of the security architecture. While American involvement in Gulf security is known to have expanded significantly after Britain's withdrawal from the region in the early 1970s, this did not represent a sudden assumption of responsibility. Rather, it marked the culmination of a longer historical process through which the United States evolved from a country with a limited economic and diplomatic presence in the Gulf into the region's principal external security guarantor.<sup>16</sup>

This evolution was already under way during the Second World War, when the strategic importance of Gulf oil and the region's role as a logistical corridor for Allied support to the Soviet Union drew the United States more directly into regional affairs. American forces were deployed to support supply routes, while infrastructure development and military advisory missions expanded the country's operational presence. At the same time, regional actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia increasingly looked to the United States as a source of political and security support, reinforcing a pattern in which external protection was both sought and institutionalised.<sup>17</sup> Over time, this external role became embedded within the broader security architecture of the Gulf, where the presence and strategic relevance of outside powers, particularly the United States, have remained central to regional stability.<sup>18</sup> This commitment was formalised in the 1980 Carter Doctrine, which defined the Persian Gulf as a vital American interest. Coming in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the doctrine asserted that any attempt by an external force to gain control of the region would be met with military force.<sup>19</sup>

Over several decades, Washington has built a regional security framework in the Gulf region through defence cooperation, arms transfers and military basing arrangements. Shared concerns over Iranian influence have deepened this partnership, particularly after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the growth of Iranian regional power strengthened security cooperation between the United States and key Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia. Large-scale arms agreements and defence cooperation have further integrated Gulf militaries with American systems, tying

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<sup>16</sup> Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1883-1992* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), 43-49, 146-147, [https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=\\_OHvJ984NosC](https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=_OHvJ984NosC)

<sup>17</sup> Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf*, 46-51, 73

<sup>18</sup> Steven W. Hook and Tim Niblock, "Introduction", in *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*, ed. Steven W. Hook and Tim Niblock (Gerlach Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1df4h8c.3>

<sup>19</sup> Joe Stork, "The Carter Doctrine and US Bases in the Middle East", *MERIP Reports*, no. 90 (1980): 3-32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011584>; Michael T. Klare, "Oil, Iraq, and American Foreign Policy: The Continuing Salience of the Carter Doctrine", *International Journal* 62, no. 1 (2006): 31-42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40204243>

regional defence capabilities to US training, logistics and technology.<sup>20</sup> More broadly, the United States functions as an external hegemon whose power combines military protection with wider political and economic influence.<sup>21</sup> Structurally, the Gulf monarchies are relatively weak actors in the regional balance and therefore rely on the backing of this external hegemon to reinforce the regional status quo, even as they seek to preserve a degree of strategic autonomy within this framework.<sup>22</sup>

As a result, the security of many Gulf states has become closely linked to American military presence in the region. This dependence provides deterrence against external threats while simultaneously embedding the Gulf states within the dynamics of the rivalry between the United States/Israel and Iran. This military presence materialised through an extensive network of American bases and facilities across the Gulf. These include the headquarters of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar – hosting approximately 10,000 US personnel and serving as a key forward command centre – Camp Arifjan and Camp Buehring in Kuwait, Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, which hosts American military personnel and supports air and missile defence operations, as well as major air facilities such as Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE and access agreements to bases in Oman, including Seeb, Masirah and Thumrait.<sup>23</sup>

Together, this network of installations forms the operational backbone of the US presence in the Gulf, enabling sustained deployment, regional coordination and rapid response capabilities across the wider Middle East. In recent years, this military footprint has been reinforced through renewed defence cooperation with key Gulf partners. In 2025, the United States and the UAE formalised a “Major Defense Partnership” to enhance interoperability, joint capability development and defence innovation.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Washington concluded a record US\$142 billion defence agreement with Saudi Arabia, encompassing advanced capabilities, training and long-

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory F. Gause III, “From ‘Over the Horizon’ and ‘Into the Backyard’: The US-Saudi Relationship in the Gulf”, in *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies*, 5th ed., ed. David W. Lesch (Westview Press, 2012), 356

<sup>21</sup> Steven W. Hook, “Hegemonic Stability and American Power”, in *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015), 23–25

<sup>22</sup> James A. Bill, “The Geometry of Instability”, 109–110; Marina Ottaway, “Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy”, *Carnegie Papers*, no. 105, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2009, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2009/11/iran-the-united-states-and-the-gulf-the-elusive-regional-policy>

<sup>23</sup> Degang Sun, “The US Military Bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Dynamics of Readjustment”, *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 4, no. 4 (2010): 44–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2010.12023167>; Maryam Al. Kuwari, “US Military Bases in the Gulf: Better Upset than Sorry?”, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 15 September 2025, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/ResearchAndStudies/Pages/us-military-bases-in-the-gulf-better-upset-than-sorry.aspx>; “What Are the Main US Military Bases in the Middle East?” Reuters, 14 January 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-military-facilities-middle-east-2026-02-28/>.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Joint Press Statement on U.S.-UAE Major Defense Partnership”, 16 May 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4189772/joint-press-statement-on-us-uae-major-defense-partnership/>

term capacity building.<sup>25</sup> In parallel, the United States and Qatar reaffirmed their security partnership through the 2025 Strategic Dialogue, including upgrades to Al Udeid Air Base and enhanced joint defence cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond security, the United States remains a key partner in the Gulf's economic and diplomatic architecture. While historically narrower and concentrated in the energy and defence sectors,<sup>27</sup> economic ties have expanded in recent years to include investment, technology and industrial cooperation linked to the Gulf states' national development agendas. This is evident in President Trump's 2025 Gulf tour, which resulted in the deepening of investment, economic, technological and defence agreements across Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, reflecting a renewed emphasis on economic statecraft as a pillar of US regional engagement.<sup>28</sup> At the multilateral level, the 2025 Gulf-US Summit in Riyadh further reflects how deeply institutionalised this partnership has become across multiple sectors and levels of engagement.<sup>29</sup> This institutional depth reinforces an already extensive military presence, which remains embedded through defence cooperation and integrated security systems across the Gulf.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, Washington's role in successive phases of peace agreements and normalisation between Israel and various Arab countries, notably Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain<sup>31</sup> – alongside its leadership in Gaza ceasefire efforts and its “Board of Peace” initiative, which has secured Gulf backing<sup>32</sup> – underscores America's enduring influence and anchors Gulf hedging. Overall, the United States is a defining feature of the Gulf's strategic order across the military, economic and diplomatic domains.

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<sup>25</sup> The White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic \$600 Billion Investment Commitment in Saudi Arabia”, 13 May 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-historic-600-billion-investment-commitment-in-saudi-arabia/>

<sup>26</sup> US Department of State, “Joint Statement on the Seventh United States-Qatar Strategic Dialogue: An Enduring Strategic Partnership”, 20 December 2025, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-seventh-united-states-qatar-strategic-dialogue-an-enduring-strategic-partnership>

<sup>27</sup> Tim Niblock, “Strategic Economic Relationships and Strategic Openings in the Gulf”, in *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*, ed. Hook and Niblock.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Dent, “Unpacking Trump's 2025 Gulf Investment Tour”, PolicyWatch 4062, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 June 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-trumps-2025-gulf-investment-tour>

<sup>29</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) General Secretariat, “Gulf-US Summit Held in Riyadh at the Kind Invitation of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques”, 14 May 2025, <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news2025-5-14-2.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> Niblock, “Strategic Economic Relationships and Strategic Openings in the Gulf”.

<sup>31</sup> Nazhath Faheema, “Shifting Politics Between Muslim States & Israel: From the Khartoum Declaration to the Abraham Accords”, *Muslim Politics Review* 2, no. 2 (2023): 163–207, <https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v2i2.203>

<sup>32</sup> Valentina Pasquali, “Gulf States Pledge Billions for Board of Peace Gaza Plans”, AGBI (Arabian Gulf Business Insight), 20 February 2026, <https://www.agbi.com/development/2026/02/gulf-states-pledge-billions-for-board-of-peace-gaza-plans>

## 2. Gulf-Iran Relations

The second dimension of Gulf hedging is the relationship between the Gulf states and Iran. Milani observes that Iran's Gulf policy has often been portrayed as "messianically imperialistic", with its diplomatic gestures of moderation dismissed as tactical manoeuvres intended to mask ambitions of regional dominance and the export of revolutionary ideology. However, he argues that such interpretations are exaggerated. In his assessment, Iranian policy towards the Gulf has demonstrated pragmatism and moderation in support of regional stability.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, comparatively little attention is given to how the Gulf states themselves view Iran. Regional perspectives are shaped by circumstances that differ from those often expressed by Washington or Tel Aviv.

Historically, relations between Iran and the Gulf states have been characterised by cautious engagement. Those ties have long combined political rivalry with diplomatic engagement and economic interaction, reflecting geographic proximity as well as enduring cultural and social ties, substantial trading links, and persistent mutual distrust and misperception.<sup>34</sup> These tensions have also been reinforced by the rise of competing Arab and Iranian nationalisms, which have shaped mutual perceptions of regional hierarchy and fuelled anxieties over dominance on both sides.<sup>35</sup>

These dynamics were further shaped by shifting regional orders, particularly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which altered the balance of power and intensified Gulf concerns about ideological export and regional influence.<sup>36</sup> Competition between Iran and several Gulf states has frequently played out indirectly through regional arenas such as Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.<sup>37</sup> While many governments in the region remain wary of Iranian influence in regional conflicts and its support for allied non-state actors, they have generally managed relations with Tehran with a degree of diplomatic caution.<sup>38</sup>

There have also been periodic direct confrontations that have strained relations between Tehran and some Gulf states. First, the long-standing dispute over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb has remained a persistent source of tension

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<sup>33</sup> Milani M. Milani, "Iran's Gulf Policy: From Idealism and Confrontation to Pragmatism and Moderation", in *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability*, 2nd impression, ed. Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi (Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014), 83

<sup>34</sup> Joseph A. Kechichian, ed., *Iran, Iraq and the Arab Gulf States* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 410, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-63443-9>; Examples of political rivalry include, apart from the dispute between Iran and the UAE over the islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb in the Strait of Hormuz, Iranian claims over Bahrain prior to its independence, and continuing strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional influence in the Gulf.

<sup>35</sup> Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar, eds., *Iran and the Arab World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 200–201, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22538-5>;

<sup>36</sup> Joseph A. Kechichian, ed., *Iran, Iraq and the Arab Gulf States*, 441–442

<sup>37</sup> Gregory F. Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 247–248.

<sup>38</sup> Rodger Shanahan, "The Gulf States and Iran: Robust Competitors or Interested Bystanders?", Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2009, 3–5; Marina Ottaway, "Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009, 19–20;

between the UAE and Iran since 1971, despite repeated calls by the UAE for negotiation.<sup>39</sup> Then, the 2016 rupture between Saudi Arabia and Iran, following the execution of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, marked a significant escalation, leading to years of severed diplomatic ties and regional fallout.<sup>40</sup> The other Gulf states have generally maintained more pragmatic channels of engagement with Tehran, though they withdrew their ambassadors from Iran in solidarity with Saudi Arabia.

This pattern of cautious engagement has not only persisted but also evolved in important ways. Rather than fully balancing against Iran, the Gulf states have increasingly exhibited what has been described as “under balancing”, maintaining engagement and de-escalation even in the presence of significant security concerns. This approach is partly driven by economic considerations. Expectations of future trade and regional stability incentivised cooperation and raised the perceived costs of any direct confrontation.<sup>41</sup>

A significant contemporary development in Iran-Gulf relations has been the gradual restoration of diplomatic ties. In 2022, the UAE and Kuwait reinstated ambassadors to Iran after a six-year absence, signalling a shift towards cautious re-engagement.<sup>42</sup> This was followed by a 2023 China-brokered agreement to restore diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, marking a major step towards regional de-escalation.<sup>43</sup> Such developments underscore an increasing degree of Gulf strategic autonomy as the Gulf states pursue flexible, multi-directional foreign policies.<sup>44</sup> These changes echo earlier Iranian efforts to promote regional dialogue, such as the 2019 Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), which called for a cooperative security framework among Gulf states.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington, DC, “Occupied UAE Islands”, n.d., <https://www.uae-embassy.org/foreign-policy/occupied-uae-islands>

<sup>40</sup> Martin Chulov, “Saudi Arabia Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Iran after Execution of Cleric”, *The Guardian*, 4 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/03/saudi-arabia-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-after-nimr-execution>

<sup>41</sup> Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar, eds., *Iran and the Arab World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 45–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22538-5>

<sup>42</sup> Al Jazeera, “UAE Ambassador to Iran to Return, 6 Years after Relations Severed”, 21 August 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/21/uae-says-ambassador-to-iran-to-return-to-tehran-incoming-days>; AFP, “United Arab Emirates Reinstates Ambassador to Iran after Six-Year Absence”, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/22/united-arab-emirates-reinstates-ambassador-to-iran-after-six-year-absence>; Giorgio Cafiero, “Regardless of the Nuclear Deal’s Fate, Kuwait Will Work with Iran”, *The New Arab*, 15 August 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/regardless-jcpoas-fate-kuwait-will-work-iran>

<sup>43</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Joint Trilateral Statement by the People’s Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran”, 10 March 2023, [https://ir.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zyxw/202303/t20230311\\_11039241.htm](https://ir.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zyxw/202303/t20230311_11039241.htm); *The Straits Times*, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Resume Ties in Deal Brokered with China’s Help”, 10 March 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/iran-and-saudi-arabia-agree-to-resume-ties-re-open-embassies-iranian-state-media>

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Hanau Santini and Paolo Wulzer, “The Evolution of the Gulf: History and Theories of a Complex Subregional System”, *Middle East Policy* 31, no. 1 (March 2024): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12733>

<sup>45</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, “FM Zarif’s Al-Rai Article on Hormuz Peace Endeavour”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2019, <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/printnews/544114>

Taken together, Iran-Gulf relations are structured less by conventional balancing than by calibrated engagement under conditions of uncertainty.

### 3. Evolving Gulf-Israel Relations

The evolving relations between the Gulf states and Israel constitute the third dimension of Gulf hedging. Historically, most Gulf governments maintained no formal diplomatic relations with Israel, reflecting the wider Arab consensus and the centrality of the Palestinian question in regional politics. This position was symbolically captured in the 1967 Khartoum Resolution, with its well-known formula of “no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it”.<sup>46</sup> More broadly, Israel was widely understood across the Arab world, and among many postcolonial and non-aligned states, as a settler-colonial entity imposed on the region. Within this setting, opposition to Israel was not only a matter of interstate rivalry but also one tied to anti-colonial solidarity and Arab nationalism.

Although Egypt and Jordan later departed from this collective positioning by signing peace treaties with Israel in 1979 and 1994, respectively, these agreements were widely regarded as forms of “cold peace”, in which formal diplomatic recognition did not translate into deep regional acceptance or broad societal reconciliation.<sup>47</sup>

The Gulf states, by contrast, were not direct frontline parties in the Arab-Israeli wars and were geographically removed from the conflict. Their engagement with Israel was shaped less by battlefield confrontation than the domestic legitimacy imperative and concomitant regime security concerns, as well as alignment with broader Arab and Islamic expectations. Public opposition to Israel functioned as an important mechanism through which Gulf rulers burnished their Arab credentials, particularly as their security dependence on the United States deepened. Despite this official posture, the historical record suggests that Gulf-Israel relations were never entirely absent. Even during periods of formal boycott, limited and often clandestine interactions took place where strategic interests converged, including instances of quiet coordination involving Saudi Arabia and Israel in shared regional theatres. Over time, especially from the 1990s onwards, some Gulf states such as Oman and Qatar cautiously expanded contacts with Israel in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, signalling early signs of divergence from within the Gulf bloc.<sup>48</sup>

In recent years, however, these relations have begun to evolve. The normalisation agreements signed between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain in 2020 marked a significant development, opening new channels of diplomatic, economic, and security

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<sup>46</sup> League of Arab States, “Khartoum Resolution”, 1 September 1967, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-193039/>

<sup>47</sup> Nazhath Faheema, “Shifting Politics Between Muslim States & Israel”.

<sup>48</sup> Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, “The Gulf Arab States and Israel since 1967: From ‘No Negotiation’ to Tacit Cooperation”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017): 576–92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48541203>; Elie Podeh, “Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018”, *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 563–86, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26933006>

cooperation.<sup>49</sup> While engagement remains politically sensitive and uneven across the Gulf, these developments reflect a gradual recalibration of regional diplomacy. Beneath the language of coexistence and economic opportunity, however, a deeper convergence has taken place, particularly in the security domain. The post-2020 period has seen the emergence of an increasingly overt security partnership between Israel and key Gulf states. This evolving cooperation has included intelligence sharing, joint military activities, and growing coordination on regional security issues, reflecting not merely diplomatic normalisation but the gradual consolidation of a more structured security-oriented alignment.<sup>50</sup>

Even the war in Gaza between Israel and the Palestinian militant movement Hamas, which erupted in October 2023 and severely tested the diplomatic foundations of the Abraham Accords, did not fundamentally reverse these emerging patterns of contemporary engagements. While the Gulf states publicly condemned Israel's actions and faced renewed domestic and regional pressure, underlying forms of security cooperation persisted, and, in some cases, deepened through US-facilitated frameworks. These developments reflect continuing strategic convergence, particularly regarding Iran.<sup>51</sup> This divergence between public rhetoric and private cooperation underscores the pragmatic logic sustaining Gulf-Israel relations, even amid an acute regional crisis.

#### 4. The Iran-Israel Rivalry

The fourth aspect of Gulf hedging lies in the enduring rivalry between Iran and Israel, which extends beyond conventional geopolitical competition into ideological and civilisational contestation. Iranian narratives portray Israel as a colonial, occupying, and oppressive force imposed upon the Middle East, while Israeli discourse depicts the Iranian regime as a revolutionary ideological force fundamentally threatening to regional stability. Leaders in both countries have repeatedly identified the other as their foremost enemy.<sup>52</sup> Iranian leaders have called for Israel's destruction and predicted the

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<sup>49</sup> US Department of State, "The Abraham Accords", archived 20 January 2017–20 January 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>

<sup>50</sup> Elham Fakhro and Tareq Baconi, "A Shared Vision: Security Convergence between the Gulf and Israel", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 51, no. 3 (2022): 50–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2022.2090209>

<sup>51</sup> David Kenner, "Arab States Expanded Cooperation with Israeli Military during Gaza War, Files Show", *The Washington Post*, 11 October 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/10/11/us-israel-arab-military-leaked-documents/>; David Kenner, "Arab States Deepened Military Ties with Israel while Denouncing Gaza War, Leak Reveals", *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, 11 October 2025, <https://www.icij.org/news/2025/10/arab-states-deepened-military-ties-with-israel-while-denouncing-gaza-war-leak-reveals>; Elizabeth Dent, "Israel-UAE Defense Cooperation Grows under the Abraham Accords", *PolicyWatch* 4087, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 5 August 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-uae-defense-cooperation-grows-under-abraham-accords>

<sup>52</sup> James A. Bill, "The Geometry of Instability", 114; For examples of such statements reported in media, see: Al Jazeera, "Who Is Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and Why Is He a Possible Target?" 28 February 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/28/who-is-irans-supreme-leader-khamenei-and-why-is-he-a-possible-target>; TV7 Israel News, "Iran Greatest Enemy of Israel, Netanyahu Says", 24 January 2019, <https://www.tv7israelnews.com/iran-greatest-enemy-of-israel->

eventual disappearance of the Israeli state.<sup>53</sup> Israeli leaders, in turn, have consistently framed Iran as the principal regional threat.<sup>54</sup> This hostility has been sharpened by concerns surrounding Iran's nuclear programme and the possibility of its weaponisation, which Israeli leaders treat as an existential challenge.<sup>55</sup>

Yet this was not the case at any point in history. Relations between the two states were once shaped by pragmatic cooperation. Both shared geopolitical interests, including concerns over Arab nationalism, Soviet influence, and regional instability. The emergence of the current rivalry is therefore a relatively recent development, driven by shifts in the regional balance of power rather than inherent opposition. The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked a critical rupture. The institutionalisation of anti-Zionism within the Islamic Republic's political identity recast Israel from a strategic partner to a central adversary. This transformation was reinforced by the removal of common threats through the fraying of pan-Arab nationalism and the Soviets becoming bogged down in Afghanistan. Later regional developments, particularly the 2003 Iraq War and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, further altered the regional balance by expanding Iran's strategic influence and intensifying Israeli threat perceptions. Together, these developments led each state to be redefined as a primary security challenge to the other and laid the basis for a more expansive and direct confrontation across the region.<sup>56</sup>

In recent years, this antagonistic relationship has evolved from a largely indirect, covert contest into a more expansive, increasingly direct form of confrontation across multiple theatres. This expansion has been driven in large part by Iran's growing reliance on networks of allied non-state actors across the region, including in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, thereby transforming the rivalry into a multilayered confrontation across several interconnected fronts.<sup>57</sup> This tension also extended the conflict into new strategic spaces, including the Red Sea and Eastern Africa, where

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netanyahu-says/; Aaron Benson, "Iran War: The Man Who Is the Adversary and Enemy!" *The Times of Israel*, 1 March 2026, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/iran-war-the-man-who-is-the-adversary-and-enemy/>; Al Jazeera, "Khamenei Says Iran and Its Allies Will Not Back Down from Israeli Attacks", 4 October 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/4/khamenei-says-iran-and-its-allies-will-not-back-down-from-israeli-attacks>

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (PublicAffairs, 2008), 473–474, discussing Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2005 statement that Israel should be "wiped off the map"; Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's Supreme Leader Says Israel Won't Exist in 25 Years", *New York Times*, 9 September 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, "Speech at the United Nations General Assembly", 22 September 2016, Government of Israel, <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/speechun220916> ("The greatest threat to my country, to our region ... remains the militant Islamic regime of Iran.")

<sup>55</sup> Gause, "From 'Over the Horizon' and 'Into the Backyard'", 248; Hüseyin Faruk Şimşek, "Iran's Proxy War Paradox: Strategic Gains, Control Issues, and Operational Constraints", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 36, no. 6 (2025): 997–1024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2512807>

<sup>56</sup> Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader, and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry* chap. 1, "Introduction", chap. 1, (RAND Corporation, 2011), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1143osd.6>; Marta Furlan, "Israeli-Iranian Relations: Past Friendship, Current Hostility", *Israel Affairs* 28, no. 2 (2022): 170–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2022.2041304>; Maysam Behraves, "Iran's Policy in the Red Sea and East of Africa: Israel's Concerns", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (2024): 667–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2218107>

<sup>57</sup> Furlan, "Israeli-Iranian Relations".

Iranian efforts to extend influence and sustain support networks have in turn generated Israeli responses aimed at containment and disruption.<sup>58</sup>

The intense shift towards direct confrontation became particularly evident in 2024, when the conflict moved beyond proxy-mediated violence to include overt military exchange and wider regional repercussions, marking a significant escalation in both form and consequence.<sup>59</sup> However, despite this shift, the escalation remained controlled rather than open-ended. Both sides demonstrated a willingness to engage directly while simultaneously calibrating their actions to avoid triggering a broader regional war. Structural constraints reinforced this restraint: neither Iran nor Israel possesses the capacity or incentive to sustain prolonged conventional warfare, particularly given the risks of regional spillover, involvement of external powers, and the unpredictability introduced by allied non-state actors.<sup>60</sup>

The 2025 Iran-Israel war marked the most intense phase of confrontation, yet it remained limited in both duration and scope. The 12-day conflict triggered by Israel's direct attack on Iranian military and nuclear facilities, followed by missile exchanges between the two states and significant civilian disruption, reflected a further shift towards overt engagement. However, even at that level of intensity, the conflict did not escalate into sustained war. A US-brokered ceasefire in June 2025 brought a formal halt to hostilities, but its implementation exposed persistent instability.<sup>61</sup> Rather than signalling resolution, the ceasefire functioned as a temporary pause within an ongoing confrontation, with both Iran and Israel seeking to consolidate gains while avoiding further escalation.<sup>62</sup>

## 5. US-Iran Antagonism

Alongside the Iran-Israel rivalry, the long-standing antagonism between the United States and Iran forms another central dynamic shaping the Gulf security environment. For the United States, the Persian Gulf has long been tied to two enduring

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<sup>58</sup> Sara Bazoobandi and Hamid Talebian, "The Evolvement of Iran-Israel's Rivalry in the Red Sea and Eastern Africa", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 17, no. 4 (2023): 341–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2023.2299076>

<sup>59</sup> Shiqi Liu, "Beyond the Battlefield: Economic and Geopolitical Reverberations of the 2024 Israel-Iran Escalation in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2025): 130–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2025.2553258>; John Raine, Ben Barry, Nick Childs, Fabian Hinz, and Julia Voo, "Iran and Israel: Everything Short of War", *Survival* 66, no. 3 (2024): 79–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2357485>

<sup>60</sup> Abdul Wasi Popalzay, Musssaib Rasool Mir, and Rajani Mol, "From Proxy Warfare to Direct Confrontation: The Evolving Landscape of the Israel-Iran Conflict 2024–2025", *Chinese Journal of International Review* 7, no. 4 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2630531325500179>

<sup>61</sup> "Trump Says Iran and Israel Agree to a 'Complete and Total' Ceasefire to End 12-Day War", *The Straits Times*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/trump-says-iran-and-israel-agree-to-a-ceasefire>

<sup>62</sup> Raz Zimmt, "The Israel-Iran War: Concluded but Not Resolved", Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, Israel, 25 June 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-iran-war/>

objectives: ensuring global access to the region's energy resources and preventing a hostile power from dominating the region.<sup>63</sup>

Although relations between Washington and Tehran were once cooperative, particularly under the Shah, they deteriorated sharply after the US-backed 1953 coup and collapsed altogether following the Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis.<sup>64</sup> Since then, relations between Washington and Tehran have been characterised by deep hostility, marked by sanctions, military incidents, proxy competition, and recurring crises over Iran's nuclear capacity. Iran has viewed the United States as a persistent threat to regime survival. This antagonism has also been sustained through processes of mutual "demonisation", in which each side constructs the other as ideological and cultural adversary, reinforcing cycles of hostility and misperception.<sup>65</sup>

After the Cold War, Iran increasingly came to be viewed as the principal challenger to the new order. American policy, therefore, expanded its military presence in the Gulf to safeguard regional partners while seeking to contain Iranian influence.<sup>66</sup> This was notably pursued through the policy of "dual containment", which combined sanctions, limited military action and broader efforts to constrain Iran politically and economically.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, this strategic rivalry was largely operationalised through low-intensity conflict, in which sustained pressure, indirect confrontation and calibrated military engagements replaced direct large-scale warfare, allowing both sides to compete without triggering full-scale escalation.<sup>68</sup>

In recent years, this strategic rivalry has been characterised by the coexistence of diplomatic engagement and rising military tension. While mediation efforts have enabled agreements such as prisoner exchanges, these have occurred alongside a significant reinforcement of US military deployments in the Gulf and reciprocal Iranian action, including missile development and maritime confrontations.<sup>69</sup> These reflect a broader pattern in which both sides combine coercive pressure with calibrated restraint. Iran, for instance, at times adopted a posture of "strategic patience", particularly following the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the imposition of sanctions that placed

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<sup>63</sup> Gary Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment", in *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies*, 5th ed., ed. David W. Lesch (Westview Press, 2012), 327–328.

<sup>64</sup> Jalil Roshandel and Nathan Chapman Lean, "Iran and the United States", in *Iran, Israel, and the United States: Regime Security vs. Political Legitimacy* (Praeger, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> William O. Beeman, "Discourse and Demonization", in *The Great Satan vs. the Mad Mullahs: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other* (Praeger, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Gause, "From 'Over the Horizon' and 'Into the Backyard'", 244–245.

<sup>67</sup> Sasan Fayazmanesh, *The United States and Iran: Sanctions, Wars and the Policy of Dual Containment* (Routledge, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203946206>.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph J. St. Marie and Shahdad Naghshpour, "Low-Intensity Conflict and Fourth Generation Warfare", in *Revolutionary Iran and the United States: Low-Intensity Conflict in the Persian Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315606323>.

<sup>69</sup> Sima Shine and Danny Citrinowicz, "Increasing Tension between the United States and Iran", Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), INSS Insight no. 1751, 14 August 2023, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/usa-iran-gulf/>.

pressure on its economy and regional position, before shifting towards more proactive responses as these pressures intensified.<sup>70</sup>

Under the first Trump administration, this antagonism reached one of its lowest points, as Washington consolidated and adopted a strategy of “maximum pressure”, relying on extensive economic sanctions and closer coordination with regional partners to constrain Iranian influence.<sup>71</sup> This approach also reflected an effort to reassert deterrence through tougher rhetoric and signalling, even as the administration remained mindful of the risks of escalation.<sup>72</sup> In response, Iran adopted a strategy of “maximum resistance”. It grew its asymmetrical warfare capabilities, such as drones and cyber tools, signalling deterrence and reflecting a more offensive strategic orientation.<sup>73</sup>

This evolving antagonism cannot be understood as a purely bilateral dispute but has increasingly taken on a triangular character in which Israel remains central to the political and strategic calculations of both Washington and Tehran.<sup>74</sup> This logic is not entirely new. Even before 1979, Iran and Israel were closely linked American allies, and their relationship was shaped in part through Washington. The post-1979 rupture did not create the triangle anew, but reversed its structure, placing Washington and Israel on one side and revolutionary Iran on the other.<sup>75</sup> Recent efforts at limited US-Iran understandings highlight this enduring interdependence, as even partial agreements over Iran’s nuclear programme carry direct implications for Israeli security and broader regional stability.<sup>76</sup>

Within this triangular dynamic, Israel’s security remains an important consideration in American policy in the Gulf, particularly as concerns over Iran’s nuclear and regional activities intensified.<sup>77</sup> The US-Israel relationship shapes the regional dynamic through Washington’s broader regional posture rather than as a distinct Gulf-centred relationship.

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<sup>70</sup> Amos Yadlin, “The Rising Crisis between the United States and Iran”, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 14 May 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/rising-crisis-united-states-iran/>

<sup>71</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, “US–Iran Relations: Challenges and Opportunities”, *The Muslim World* 113, nos. 1–2 (2023): 108–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12459>

<sup>72</sup> Eldad Shavit, Sima Shine, and Anna Catran, “Iran and the United States under the Trump Administration”, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), INSS Insight no. 903, 6 March 2017, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-united-states-trump-administration>

<sup>73</sup> Mohammad Eslami, “Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program and Its Foreign and Security Policy towards the United States under the Trump Administration”, *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* 55 (2021): 37–62, <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.55.02>; Furlan, “Israeli-Iranian Relations”, 177; Bahgat, “US–Iran Relations”, 118.

<sup>74</sup> Jalil Roshandel and Nathan Chapman Lean, “Introduction”, in *Iran, Israel, and the United States: Regime Security vs. Political Legitimacy*.

<sup>75</sup> Hulda Kjeang Mørk and Hilde Henriksen Waage, “Ties That Bind: The Entangled Relations among Israel, Iran, and the United States, 1963–1967”, *The International History Review* 45, no. 3 (2023): 572–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2022.2141815>.

<sup>76</sup> Tamir Hayman and Eden Kaduri, “A Framework of Understandings between the United States and Iran: The Significance for Israel”, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), INSS Insight no. 1742, 29 June 2023, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/usa-iran-deal>

<sup>77</sup> Sick, “The United States in the Persian Gulf”, 327–328.

## The Interlocking Strategic Dilemma

The Gulf's strategic configuration reflects what has been described as "an artificial stability that masks an underlying axis of instability".<sup>78</sup> The region's hedging posture has long sought to avoid direct entanglement in confrontation between the United States and Iran. Yet a single escalation has now drawn the Gulf directly into this rivalry. The attack on Iran by the United States and Israel in February 2026, followed by Iranian retaliatory strikes against American bases and interests in the Gulf, has "shattered the Gulf's long-standing strategy of insulation," exposing the vulnerabilities embedded within the hedging architecture.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, this development should not come as a surprise. The underlying faultlines of this strategic configuration have long been visible.

Multiple and overlapping relationships rather than clearly defined alliance blocs shape the Gulf's strategic alignment, as Figure 1 illustrates. The same actors are simultaneously connected through relations of security alignment, rivalry and managed engagement. Security partnerships between the Gulf states, the United States and, increasingly, Israel provide deterrence against Iranian power. Yet the same alignments also embed the Gulf within broader rivalries between the United States, Israel and Iran. At the same time, the Gulf states maintain diplomatic and economic engagement with Iran, reflecting geographic proximity and regional interdependence.

Hedging did not remove the Gulf from regional rivalries; it concentrated them within the same strategic environment, embedding the Gulf states within the very dynamics they seek to manage. The very relationships designed to reduce risk simultaneously generated new forms of exposure, particularly as the Gulf came under crossfire during the 2026 escalation. This dynamic is not unique to the Gulf. It reflects what Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye describe as "complex interdependence", in which states are simultaneously connected through multiple channels of cooperation and conflict.<sup>80</sup> It also reflects what Glenn Snyder defines as "entrapment" in alliance politics, where states risk being drawn into conflicts initiated by their security partners.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the Gulf's interlocking strategic dilemma was structural, embedded within the very architecture that evolved to manage regional tensions.

This structural constraint is shaped by regional experiences of state collapse and conflict mismanagement, most notably the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, as well as by the configuration of the United States' military presence across the Gulf. These historical precedents heighten sensitivity to escalation and reinforce a preference for strategies that manage, rather than attempt to resolve, regional tensions. At the same time, rather than being concentrated in a single location, the United States' basing architecture is distributed across multiple Gulf states, enabling rapid force projection and sustained operations across the region. Developments such as Iranian missile

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<sup>78</sup> Bill, "The Geometry of Instability in the Gulf", 117.

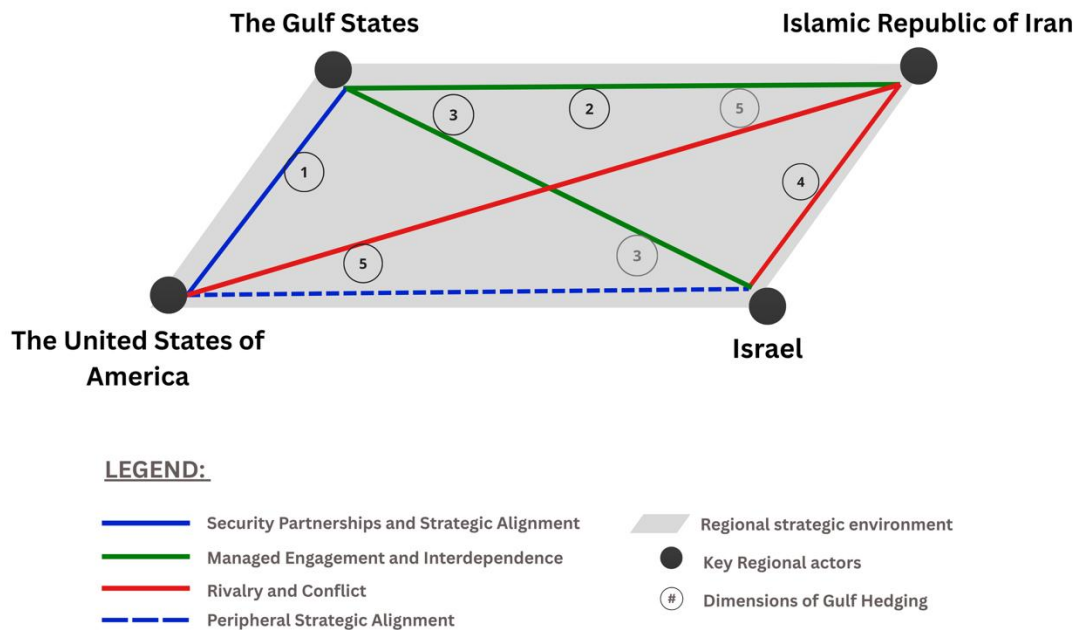
<sup>79</sup> Dania Thafer, "The GCC's Dilemma: Bound by Washington, Exposed by Iran", Gulf International Forum, 2 March 2026, <https://gulff.org/the-gccs-dilemma-bound-by-washington-exposed-b>

<sup>80</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Longman, 2012), 20–21.

<sup>81</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics", *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 467.

strikes targeting the Al Udeid Air Base highlight how these installations can render host states directly exposed to regional escalation.<sup>82</sup>

**Figure 1: Interlocking Relationships within the Gulf Hedging Architecture**



This simplified visual representation illustrates the relationships linking the United States, Iran, Israel and the Gulf states. The numbers correspond to the five dimensions of Gulf hedging described in the earlier section. The figure highlights the converging alignments and overlapping tensions shaping the regional strategic environment in which Gulf states pursue hedging.

(2026 © Nazhath Faheema)

At the same time, this security architecture has undergone important recalibrations in recent years, as the Gulf states increasingly question the reliability of long-term American commitments while continuing to depend on US military capabilities for deterrence and regional stability. Their concerns have produced a more complex pattern of engagement in which security cooperation with the United States remains indispensable, even as the Gulf states diversify their external partnerships and pursue greater strategic autonomy.<sup>83</sup>

Recent developments suggest the Gulf states have attempted to mitigate these structural risks by reducing their strategic exposure. A notable example is the April 2023 China-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which restored diplomatic relations after years of severed ties.<sup>84</sup> Saudi Arabia’s defence pact with Pakistan similarly reflects Riyadh’s efforts to diversify its external security partnerships

<sup>82</sup> Maryam Al Kuwari, “US Military Bases in the Gulf: Better Upset than Sorry?” Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 15 September 2025, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/us-military-bases-in-the-gulf-better-upset-than-sorry.pdf>

<sup>83</sup> Daniel Benaim, Luke Lochman, Karen E. Young, Charles W. Freeman Jr., and Jonathan Moran, “US-Gulf Relations”, *Middle East Policy* 29, no. 1 (2022): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12653>

<sup>84</sup> David Schenker, “Gulf De-escalation and Hedging in the Shadow of US Retrenchment”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 12 September 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gulf-de-escalation-and-hedging-shadow-us-retrenchment>

beyond reliance on the United States. Similar dynamics are visible across the Gulf.<sup>85</sup> Qatar, for instance, has strengthened relations with additional partners, including Turkey and several European powers, while countries such as Kuwait have expanded engagement with China in areas of economic and technological cooperation.<sup>86</sup> The UAE, on the other hand, has maintained its relations with Israel, with reports of growing defence-industrial cooperation between the countries. Taken together, these developments reflect a broader strategy in which the Gulf states seek to manage relations with both Iran and the United States while simultaneously diversifying their external partnerships.

These efforts have not fundamentally altered the underlying strategic imbalance that shapes the Gulf security environment. None of the external arrangements carries the same security weight as the long-standing strategic alignment between the United States and Israel. In the past two years, following Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel, this asymmetry has become even more visible. Israel's military operations have been framed as weakening Iran's regional position, particularly through the degradation of groups affiliated with Iran, such as Hamas and Hezbollah. At the same time, however, analysis also suggests that Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance has entered a phase of adaptation, restructuring and reconstitution rather than collapse.<sup>87</sup> These developments underline the persistent structural constraints facing the Gulf states. Under what conditions can the Gulf continue to sustain its strategy of managing relations across competing rivalries, or will the balance of power increasingly compel it to lean towards one side?

Moving closer to the US-Israel security axis would provide the Gulf states with significant material advantages. The depth of American military presence in the region and Israel's growing technological and intelligence capabilities offer a level of deterrence that alternative partnerships cannot easily match. The Israeli strikes on Qatar in 2025, the direct clash between Israel and Iran, and the recent regional escalation have all highlighted the extent of military coordination between Washington and Tel Aviv. In theory, closer alignment with this security framework could signal to Tehran the emergence of a regional coalition capable of isolating Iran from the Persian Gulf and constraining its regional influence. Such a shift arguably may even pressure the Iranian leadership to interpret it as abandonment by fellow Muslim neighbouring states.

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<sup>85</sup> Naade Ali and Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Pakistan's Strategic Defense Pact with Saudi Arabia: A New Security Architecture in the Wider Middle East", Middle East Institute, 8 October 2025, <https://mei.edu/publication/pakistans-strategic-defense-pact-saudi-arabia-new-security-architecture-wider-middle>

<sup>86</sup> Annelle Sheline, "Are Qatar and Saudi Arabia Reassessing Their Reliance on the US?" Quincy Brief 94, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, February 26, 2026, <https://quincyinst.org/research/are-qatar-and-saudi-arabia-reassessing-their-reliance-on-the-us/>; Mordechai Chaziza, "Small States in the Era of Great Power Rivalry: Kuwait Comprehensive Hedging Strategy Framework", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2025): 172–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2025.2503059>

<sup>87</sup> Reza Parchizadeh, "Iran's Axis of Resistance after the 12-Day War: Adaptation, Restructuring, and Reconstitution", Middle East Institute, 19 December 2025, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-axis-resistance-after-12-day-war-adaptation-restructuring-and-reconstitution>

Yet this option carries a high political cost. Israeli policies towards Palestine, particularly in Gaza, have come under intense international scrutiny, even drawing accusations of genocide.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, Israeli leaders' vision of "Greater Israel" has been widely condemned by Arab and Muslim governments as threatening regional sovereignty and stability.<sup>89</sup> First, such condemnation reveals a fundamental political misalignment between Israel and much of the Arab world regarding the future of the regional order. Concerns about territorial expansion and sovereignty have long shaped Arab perceptions of Israel, reflected historically in the Khartoum Resolution. Second, moving closer to the US-Israel security axis risks placing the Gulf states within a broader regional power dynamic dominated by Washington and Tel Aviv, a position that remains politically sensitive across the Muslim world.

In this sense, the Gulf is positioned not between competing powers but within a system where every relationship carries both protection and risk. This dilemma is therefore not which side to choose but how to operate when no option offers absolute insulation from escalation. The 2026 war did not create these structural constraints; it merely exposed and intensified them.

## **Strained Hedging: Continuity, Constraint and Strategic Limits**

Whether the Gulf states' long-standing hedging strategy can be sustained under conditions of direct confrontation between major regional and external powers is therefore an open question. Does such a context represent a departure from established patterns of hedging, or a continuation of these strategies under intensified structural pressure?

Direct and proxy attacks have strained relations and reinforced perceptions of threat, yet Gulf responses have remained calibrated and oriented towards de-escalation.<sup>90</sup> Gulf leaders have acknowledged the shock of these attacks while

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<sup>88</sup> For legal proceedings before the International Court of Justice concerning alleged violations of the Genocide Convention, see Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (South Africa v. Israel), Order on Provisional Measures, International Court of Justice, 26 January 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454>; For a UN investigation raising similar concerns, see United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, 14 August 2025, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/report-of-coi-14aug25/>

<sup>89</sup> Al Jazeera, "Arab, Islamic Countries Condemn Netanyahu's 'Greater Israel' Remark", 16 August 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/16/arab-islamic-countries-condemn-netanyahus-greater-israel-remark>; Maia Davies, "US Ambassador's Israel Comments Condemned by Arab and Muslim Nations", BBC News, 22 February 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn5gkkgdzkcyo>; Jordan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Post on X", X (formerly Twitter), 16 August 2025, <https://x.com/ForeignMinistry/status/1956418835361501658>

<sup>90</sup> "Gulf States Weigh Military Options to Counter Iran's Escalation", Bloomberg News, 24 March 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-03-24/gulf-states-weigh-military-options-to-counter-iran-s-escalation>; Summer Said and Jared Malsin, "Gulf States Edge Toward Joining Fight Against Iran: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Get Tougher on Basing and Finances", *Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-gulf-states-offense-decision-b8d98ff9>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, "Six Arab States Renew Condemnation of Direct, Proxy Iranian Attacks in the Region", Doha, 25 March 2026,

emphasising the need to defend national sovereignty. Diplomatic adviser to the UAE president Anwar Gargash warned that Iran's strikes had effectively "isolated" Tehran and urged it to recognise that its war was not with its neighbours.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, former Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim stated that by striking the Gulf countries, Iran had "lost a lot of friends in the region and a lot of sympathy."<sup>92</sup>

The ceasefire that the United States and Iran provisionally agreed to on 7 April 2026,<sup>93</sup> while supposedly halting large-scale hostilities, did not resolve the underlying dynamics of confrontation. Continued instability and military signalling in its aftermath suggest that the ceasefire is tenuous and has not fundamentally altered the structural conditions driving the conflict.<sup>94</sup> For the Gulf states, this reinforces a familiar pattern: periods of de-escalation provide temporary relief but leave their underlying vulnerability unchanged.

Beyond its immediate security implications, the war has eroded the Gulf states' most important intangible assets: their image as a stable and secure environment for investment, tourism and global connectivity. This is a particularly significant development, given the centrality of long-term economic transformation agendas, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which depend on sustained regional stability and investor confidence. The perception of the Gulf as a "safe haven" has been disrupted by the visibility of strikes on civilian infrastructure, economic hubs and urban centres.<sup>95</sup> This carries not only material consequences but also psychological and reputational effects as confidence among investors, businesses and expatriate populations becomes fragile.<sup>96</sup> This vulnerability has been further underscored by heightened tensions around the Strait of Hormuz, where disruptions to maritime traffic and concerns over energy flows have raised the risk of broader economic instability.<sup>97</sup> In this sense, the

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<https://mofa.gov.qa/en/latest-articles/statements/six-arab-states-renew-condemnation-of-direct-proxy-iranian-attacks-in-the-region>.

<sup>91</sup> The Economic Times, "Never Expected Iran to Launch Such an Aggressive War': Diplomatic Adviser to the UAE President Anwar Gargash", *The Economic Times*, April 2, 2026, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/never-expected-iran-to-launch-such-an-aggressive-war-diplomatic-adviser-to-the-uae-president-anwar-gargash/articleshow/129131465.cms>

<sup>92</sup> *Doha News*, "Former Qatari PM: Iran Has 'Lost Friends' in Gulf after Striking Civilian Targets", 4 March 2026, <https://dohanews.co/former-qatari-pm-iran-has-lost-friends-in-gulf-after-striking-civilian-target>

<sup>93</sup> Andrew Roth, "US and Iran Agree to Provisional Ceasefire as Tehran Says It Will Reopen Strait of Hormuz", *The Guardian*, 8 April 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/07/trump-iran-war-ceasefire>

<sup>94</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iran Reasserts Control of Hormuz Strait as Trump Warns Against 'Blackmail'", 18 April 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/18/iran-reasserts-control-of-hormuz-strait-as-trump-warns-against-blackmail>

<sup>95</sup> Carl Skadian, "Commentary: Iran War Has Shattered the Gulf's Image as an Oasis", Channel News Asia, 7 March 2026, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/iran-war-gulf-states-safe-qatar-dubai-saudi-arabia-5976721>

<sup>96</sup> Reuters, "Gulf Markets Slip as Middle East Tensions Keep Investors Cautious", 26 March 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-markets-slip-middle-east-tensions-keep-investors-cautious-2026-03-26>

<sup>97</sup> The Straits Times, "Gulf Countries' Plans to Bypass Strait of Hormuz Still Far Off, Experts Warn", *The Straits Times*, 2 May 2026, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/gulf-countries-plans-to-bypass-strait-of-hormuz-still-far-off-experts-warn>

impact of the conflict extends beyond physical vulnerability to include the gradual undermining of the Gulf's carefully constructed image of stability, which has long underpinned its economic and political strategies.

While exposure to Iranian retaliation reinforces the importance of existing security partnerships, particularly with the United States, the political and strategic costs of closer alignment with the US-Israel axis remain significant. As outlined in the earlier section, such alignment carries substantial political constraints, concerns about regional legitimacy and sensitivities surrounding sovereignty and territorial order.

This tension is further complicated by the broader dynamics that shaped the outbreak of the conflict. Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi described the war as a "grave miscalculation" and suggested that Washington had been drawn into the conflict despite the existence of viable diplomatic pathways.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, dissent within the United States, including the resignation of a senior counterterrorism official who questioned the assessment of an imminent Iranian threat, points to the internal contestation over the Trump administration's decision to strike at Iran.<sup>99</sup>

Some analyses further suggest that the Gulf states' frustration with Washington's conduct of the war has deepened doubts about the reliability of the United States as a security guarantor.<sup>100</sup> In particular, shifts in policy across different American administrations highlight the extent to which Gulf states are exposed to changing strategic decisions over which they have limited influence. Gulf hedging, therefore, persists not as an optimal strategy, but as a constrained one, reflecting the limited set of viable alternatives available to the Gulf states.

This constrained persistence of hedging can be understood through insights from shelter theory, which emphasises the structural dependence of small states on external sources of political and economic support. Small states rely on "political shelter" in the form of security guarantees, diplomatic backing and strategic coverage provided by larger powers or international institutions in order to cope with crises and external threats.<sup>101</sup> In such contexts, small states are ultimately dependent on the self-interested will of great powers, whose decisions shape the conditions under which smaller states operate.<sup>102</sup> Under conditions of heightened conflict, however, this

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<sup>98</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Oman Claims Israel Pushed US into Iran War When Deal Was Possible", *The Guardian*, 19 March 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/19/us-lost-control-of-its-own-foreign-policy-oman-foreign-minister>

<sup>99</sup> Bernd Debusmann Jr, "Top US Counterterrorism Official Resigns Over Iran War, Urging Trump to 'Reverse Course'", BBC News, 18 March 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg4g66r3z40o>

<sup>100</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Where the American-Israeli War on Iran Leaves the Gulf Arabs", Stimson Center, 25 March 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2026/where-the-american-israeli-war-on-iran-leaves-the-gulf-arabs/>

<sup>101</sup> Brady, Anne-Marie, and Baldur Thorhallsson. "Small States and the Turning Point in Global Politics", in *Small States and the New Security Environment*, eds. Anne-Marie Brady and Baldur Thorhallsson, 1–18. *The World of Small States*, vol. 7. Springer, 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4_1)

<sup>102</sup> Ingimundarson, Valur. "Hedging versus Balancing: Small State Policy Options and Geopolitics in the North", *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe* 48 (2025): 41–51, <https://doi.org/10.24193/OJMNE.2025.48.03>

reliance becomes more pronounced, limiting the ability of states to diversify their alignments even if they seek to do so.

While military escalation between the United States, Israel and Iran has placed significant strain on the Gulf states' hedging posture, its underlying logic has not been fundamentally altered. For the Gulf monarchies, the central strategic objective has long been to prevent the region from falling under the dominance of any single power. This concern has applied across different configurations of regional order, whether external Western dominance, Iranian revolutionary influence or the emergence of a regional order shaped primarily by Israeli power. Hedging, therefore, has functioned not simply as a balancing tactic but as a broader effort to preserve regional autonomy within a contested security environment. Therefore, the February 2026 escalation reflects less of weak hedging than a test of the very conditions it was designed to manage.

From this perspective, Gulf responses thus far suggest continuity rather than realignment. While defending their sovereignty against Iranian attacks, Gulf leaders have continued to emphasise diplomacy and restraint as the operating principles for the region. This raises an important question: would the consequences of the 2026 war have been more severe in the absence of the Gulf states' long-standing strategy of managing relations across competing powers?

In contrast to regional conflicts, where the breakdown of such balancing acts has led to deeper fragmentation and prolonged instability,<sup>103</sup> the Gulf states' approach may have contained escalation even as it comes under strain. What appears as constraint, therefore, reflects the limits within which the hedging continues to function.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that Gulf hedging operates as a structured and layered strategy for navigating a regional environment characterised by overlapping rivalries, asymmetries of power and interdependence. The five-dimensional architecture of Gulf relations does not offer pathways out of conflict. It binds the Gulf states within a system in which security partnerships, economic ties and regional rivalries simultaneously generate both protection and vulnerability.

The 2026 war does not mark the breakdown of hedging. It merely exposes the limits more sharply. As the Gulf states come under direct attack while being embedded in the very security structures that draw them into conflict, their room for manoeuvre narrows. Yet, no viable alternative emerges. Any realignment carries political and strategic costs, while disengagement with any side is structurally impossible. Therefore, the strategic ambiguity present is not indecision, but a constraint.

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<sup>103</sup> For example, the conflicts in Iraq following the 2003 invasion and Syria since 2011, where the collapse of balancing among regional and external powers contributed to prolonged fragmentation and proxy competition.

Gulf hedging persists not because it is effective at resolving tensions, but because it remains the only available way of navigating them. In the absence of viable alternatives, it operates as a constrained strategy within an interlocking system of partnerships and rivalries that the Gulf cannot exit. Hedging is no longer a simple balancing between competing powers; rather, the Gulf states are learning to live with the confrontation – a strategy of endurance within an environment they cannot reshape, only manage. In this sense, the central question is not whether hedging will continue, but how long it can be sustained as pressure intensifies, and whether the 2026 war undermines this logic or reinforces its continued relevance under heightened pressure.

For the Gulf states, survival and stability have never depended on aligning with any one side; rather, they depend on preventing any single power from dominating the region. This remains the core logic of Gulf hedging: not to escape rivalry, but to survive within a system that continually reproduces it.

## About the Author



Nazhath Faheema is a PhD student in International Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Her research examines how material and ideational factors interact in shaping foreign policy and diplomatic behaviour. She studies how states navigate tensions between security, economic, and strategic interests on the one hand, and domestic political, ideological, religious, and historical commitments on the other, and how these dynamics influence bilateral relations, regional alignments, and international engagement. Empirically, she focuses on Israel-related foreign policy and diplomacy, particularly in relation to Muslim-majority and Global South states across Asia and the Middle East. Alongside her academic research, Faheema has over a decade of experience as an interfaith dialogue practitioner, working with religious communities, policymakers, government agencies, diplomats, and civil society actors in Singapore and internationally.

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