

Calculated Restraint: Gulf Strategy in the Iran Conflict

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Key Points

- **Strategic Restraint, Not Weakness:** Gulf states avoid offensive military action to focus on long-term regional stability and security, choosing strategic restraint over immediate retaliation.
- **Structural Security Dilemma:** Gulf decision-making is shaped by a dual reality in which Iran remains a geographic adversary, while the United States serves as a powerful but politically variable security partner, creating inherent uncertainty in defense commitments.
- **Escalation Risk Over Strategic Gain:** Direct military involvement offers limited strategic advantage but heightens the risk of escalation, potentially drawing Gulf states into a broader regional conflict.
- **Asymmetric Advantage of Iran:** Iran's reliance on missiles, drones, and proxy networks enables it to impose disproportionate costs on Gulf infrastructure and economies, reinforcing deterrence against Gulf escalation.
- **Economic and Energy Vulnerability:** The heavy dependence of Gulf economies on energy exports and critical infrastructure, particularly in sensitive chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz makes stability a paramount national security priority.
- **Alliance Paradox and Blurred Neutrality:** Gulf states simultaneously support the United States politically and logistically while avoiding direct combat roles, creating a strategic paradox that results in partial alignment without full engagement.
- **Israel Sensitivity and Domestic Constraints:** Gulf states face domestic and regional pressure regarding alignment with Israel in military operations, due to opposition to normalization and sensitivity over the Palestinian case.
- **Divergent Regional Objectives and Strategic Mistrust:** Gulf and regional states do not always share identical threat perceptions, escalation preferences, or postwar objectives, creating mistrust and limiting the possibility of unified offensive action.
- **Regional Balance:** The overarching objective of Gulf strategy is not military victory, but the preservation of regional balance, internal stability, and the avoidance of a large-scale transformative war.

Introduction

Gulf states have refrained from publicly joining the ongoing military confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, despite being directly exposed to Iranian attacks. This restraint does not necessarily indicate military weakness. Gulf countries possess substantial conventional and advanced capabilities, including modern air forces, missile defense systems, and rapid deployment forces that would allow them to engage effectively if they chose. That said, given the significant scale and sophistication of capabilities that the Iranian regime has diverted national resources to build up, any effective response would have to be concerted and multilateral. Gulf states' decisions reflect a multi-layered strategic calculation shaped by risk exposure, alliance uncertainty, asymmetric warfare realities, domestic legitimacy concerns, and shifting regional power structures.

Context

Since February 2026, tensions have escalated into open confrontation. Coordinated U.S. and Israeli military operations have targeted Iranian capabilities, prompting Iran and its regional proxies to launch sustained missile and drone attacks across the Middle East. These strikes have targeted U.S. bases, installations hosting U.S. forces, Israel, and critical Gulf infrastructure, including oil facilities and airports.²

Gulf states occupy a highly complex strategic position: frontline targets of Iranian attacks yet abstaining from direct offensive participation. They face considerable diplomatic pressure from the U.S., which emphasizes that Gulf partners are aligned with Washington's position against Tehran. While Gulf leaders officially oppose direct participation, U.S. military operations have utilized Gulf airspace and, in some cases, launched from regional bases toward Iranian targets, blurring lines of involvement and exposing Gulf territory to the Iranian retaliation.

At the same time, Gulf capitals remain cautious. Overt military engagement could trigger Iranian reprisals against infrastructure and civilian populations. Leaders therefore seek to balance U.S. expectations with regional stability and domestic legitimacy. This results in a paradoxical posture: rhetorically and logistically supporting U.S. objectives while restraining direct offensive involvement to avoid becoming deeper targets in a protracted war.^{3 4 5}

Strategic Framework

To explain the rationale behind this cautious posture, the following discussion presents a framework of nine interrelated strategic factors. Together, these factors illuminate the Gulf states' calculated restraint, showing how they balance risk, alliance dynamics, asymmetric threats, economic vulnerabilities, and domestic and regional pressures.

1. Direct Threat Exposure & Geopolitical Vulnerability:

Gulf states are already under repeated missile and drone attacks. Critical infrastructure, including oil facilities, airports, and military installations, have been targeted, resulting in both material damage and civilian casualties. Geographic proximity to Iran magnifies this vulnerability. Any escalation would not shift the battlefield outward, it would intensify it domestically, turning war into an immediate internal crisis rather than an external campaign. Moreover, escalation carries the risk of sparking a broader and extended regional war, further destabilizing the Gulf and the wider Middle East, as additional states could become involved and existing tensions across the region could spiral out of control.⁶

2. Security Dependence on the United States (Active but Limited):

Gulf states' security relies heavily on the U.S., including its military presence, air defense systems, and intelligence support. While the United States is actively engaged against Iran alongside Israel, Gulf states recognize that American strategic priorities do not always fully align with their own immediate interests, such as protecting territory, critical infrastructure, and civilian populations. In any confrontation, the defensive focus is likely to prioritize U.S. forces first, Israel second, and only then Gulf states, leaving them with limited assurance of protection. This creates a situation of reliance without complete assurance, as Gulf states recognize that the scale and evolution of the Iranian threat environment may exceed the ability to defend all targets simultaneously and continuously during large-scale escalation. As a result, Gulf states remain cautious about entering direct

confrontation, given the potential exposure of their territory, critical infrastructure, and civilian populations to retaliatory.⁷

3. Risk of American Abandonment or Policy Shift:

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 reinforced Gulf concerns about the durability of American commitments. These anxieties are compounded by multiple rounds of diplomatic engagement with Iran, including the negotiation and evolution of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which often proceeded without fully incorporating Gulf states' security interests or gaining their acceptance. For Gulf leaders, this raises a critical concern: they may bear the costs of escalation while the conflict ultimately concludes through a U.S.–Iran political arrangement that does not prioritize Gulf security, leaving them exposed to both strategic and domestic risks. The recent ceasefire approved on April 7, 2026, illustrates this dynamic: while it provides a temporary halt to hostilities and could potentially lead to a long-lasting agreement, it also demonstrates that conflict resolution may be mediated through U.S.–Iran negotiations, potentially without full Gulf involvement or guarantees, underscoring the region's ongoing vulnerability and the importance of cautious strategic calculation.⁸⁹¹⁰

4. Asymmetrical Response with Iran:

Iran relies on asymmetrical warfare, including missiles, drones, cyberattacks, and regional proxies, to avoid decisive confrontation while maintaining sustained, distributed pressure across the Gulf and the wider region. For Gulf states, this means that even a robust military response is unlikely to produce a clear or decisive victory. Iranian retaliation could be prolonged, multi-front, and unpredictable, targeting military assets along with the economic and civilian infrastructure. This persistent threat environment increases the costs and risks of escalation, reinforcing Gulf preference for restraint and defensive posturing rather than direct offensive engagement.¹¹

5. Economic and Human Cost of War (Already Evident):

The economic toll of the conflict is already measurable. The Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20% of global oil supply passes, has faced repeated disruptions, contributing to a surge in oil prices above \$100 per barrel, significantly higher than pre-conflict levels, and creating volatility in global energy markets.¹²

Gulf states, whose budgets and exports are heavily dependent on stable oil flows, have been directly affected by this instability and the resulting market uncertainty and production disruptions. Some estimates indicate that the Gulf countries lost approximately \$186 billion in the first month of the war alone, reflecting the rapid and severe economic impact of the conflict.¹³

These disruptions have global repercussions: the International Energy Agency (IEA) released around 400 million barrels of crude, the largest release in its history, to stabilize markets, while rising energy costs are driving worldwide inflation as well as higher shipping and commodity prices. On the human side, the conflict has already caused civilian and military casualties across multiple Gulf countries, demonstrating that the costs of war are not theoretical but unfolding in real time.¹⁴

6. Permanent Enemy vs Temporary Ally Dilemma:

Gulf states face a fundamental strategic imbalance as Iran represents a constant, geographically rooted adversary, while the U.S. is a powerful but politically variable ally. Iran's proximity ensures that it will remain a long-term factor in Gulf security calculations regardless of the outcome of any single conflict. In contrast, U.S. foreign policy is subject to shifting administrations, changing priorities, and periodic disengagement from the region. This variability is reflected in policy signals such as the strategic "pivot" toward Asia and the growing focus on great-power competition, as well as the gradual drawdown of U.S. military presence in parts of the Middle East. Alongside statements emphasizing U.S. energy independence and reduced reliance on Gulf oil, these developments reinforce Gulf perceptions that American security commitments may fluctuate over time.

This asymmetry creates a structural dilemma. Escalating against Iran risks provoking a permanent adversary that cannot be avoided, while relying on a non-permanent partner whose level of commitment may shift over time. As a result, Gulf states are incentivized to avoid actions that could trigger sustained confrontation with Iran without guaranteed, long-term U.S. backing.¹⁵

7. Divergent Regional Objectives and Strategic Mistrust:

Regional restraint is also shaped by differing strategic objectives and threat perceptions among Gulf and regional states. While many actors oppose Iranian escalation, they do not always agree on how the conflict should be managed, how closely they should align with the United States or Israel, or what type of regional order should emerge afterward. Some prioritize deterrence against Iran, while others emphasize de-escalation, mediation, economic stability, or strategic autonomy.

These differences create mistrust and complicate the development of a unified regional security posture. Gulf states may hesitate to engage directly in offensive operations because they cannot fully ensure that regional partners share the same escalation limits, acceptable risks, or postwar objectives. As a result, strategic restraint becomes a way to preserve political flexibility, maintain sovereign decision-making, and avoid being drawn into a conflict whose broader consequences may not align with their long-term national interests.^{16 17}

8. Concern Over Israel's Regional Ambitions (Critical Factor):

Gulf states along with its partners in the region are cautious because a weakening of Iran could strengthen Israel's position across the Middle East. Beyond battlefield outcomes, Israel is likely to expand its intelligence networks, security coordination, and regional influence, building on normalization agreements with several Arab states. This reflects a broader ambition to consolidate regional dominance, including territorial and strategic expansion beyond its current borders. Such developments could reinforce Israel's position as the dominant U.S. security partner in the region, potentially reducing Gulf influence and altering the balance of power in ways that constrain Gulf states' strategic interests. The prospect of this long-term regional realignment acts as a strong deterrent against direct Gulf involvement, even where there is shared opposition to Tehran.^{18 19 20}

9. Domestic Legitimacy, Religious Sensitivities, and Public Opinion:

Internal dynamics are a critical determinant of Gulf states' foreign policy choices. Public opinion in countries such as Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait along with some others remains strongly shaped by solidarity with Muslim populations across the region, particularly regarding Palestine, as well as the experiences of Lebanon and Syria, where Israeli military operations have left long-lasting humanitarian and political scars.

These considerations were also a main factor behind Gulf hesitation to fully join the Abraham Accords, highlighting how public sentiment constrains elite decision-making. Military alignment with Israel against another Muslim-majority state, such as Iran, risks provoking widespread public discontent, inflaming sectarian or ideological tensions, and undermining the social legitimacy of ruling elites. Gulf monarchies rely heavily on religious and social credibility; policies perceived as siding against fellow Muslim populations could weaken internal cohesion and strain governance.

Furthermore, transnational media, social networks, and pan-Arab commentary amplify public scrutiny, creating pressures that extend beyond domestic borders. Alignment with Israel in an offensive military campaign could therefore generate both domestic and regional backlash, as citizens react not only to the Palestinian issue but also to historical grievances in Lebanon and Syria. These combined factors reinforce Gulf restraint, demonstrating that decision-making is guided not only by military calculations but also by the imperative to maintain internal legitimacy and regional credibility.^{21 22}



Image 1: Graphic representation of the 9 factors driving GCC restraint. Created using ChatGPT.

Conclusion

Gulf states' restraint in the conflict with Iran reflects a deliberate strategic calculation, not necessarily military weakness in relation to Iran. Proximity to Iran, the risk of broader regional escalation, dependence on a variable U.S. security commitment, and Iran's asymmetric capabilities all increase the costs of direct engagement. Economic pressures, Israel's regional ambitions, and domestic legitimacy concerns further constrain action. Finally, divergent regional objectives and strategic mistrust further reinforce restraint, as Gulf states avoid committing to a military campaign whose escalation limits, political end state, and postwar regional consequences may not align fully with their own national interests. By carefully calibrating their involvement, Gulf states seek to protect national security, preserve regional stability, and maintain domestic legitimacy, while navigating one of the most complex geopolitical environments in contemporary Middle Eastern history. However, this calculated restraint could be tested if Iran escalates to sustained, high-impact attacks on Gulf infrastructure, population centers, or energy facilities, potentially compelling Gulf states to shift from defensive caution to direct offensive engagement.

Regardless of the immediate course of the conflict, the outcomes of this war are likely to reshape the strategic landscape of the Middle East, influencing power balances, regional alliances, and the dynamics between the U.S. and its current partners and allies. The war's consequences will have lasting effects on security strategies, diplomatic alignments, and the region's future trajectory.

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