

ORION FORUM

Gulf Arab States Need Israel and Iran to De-escalate

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President Donald J. Trump successfully [cajoling](#) Israel and Iran into a precarious ceasefire this month was welcome news in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Wanting stability to prevail in the region, the Gulf Arab monarchies have stakes in this truce holding up so that the Israel-Iran war does not restart.

Although pre-signaled, telegraphed, and mostly symbolic, the Iranian missile [attack](#) on USCENTCOM's forward headquarters at Qatar's al-Udeid base on June 23 was a reminder of how easily any armed conflict between the US and Israel, on one side, and Iran, on the other can spread into GCC states. Gulf Arab monarchies see the risk of being entangled in regional hostilities as unacceptable.

Ultimately, GCC members recognize that an unfreezing of the Israel-Iran conflict risks triggering widespread security, economic, and environmental crises, which could severely undermine the regional stability that is necessary for the Gulf Arab monarchies to attract foreign direct investment and grow key non-hydrocarbon sectors, including tourism and logistics, in pursuit of their ambitious economic development and diversification plans.

Keeping Détente with Iran on Track

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have spent the past few years approaching Iran through dialogue and diplomacy, as opposed to confrontation. Seeking to limit and manage their tensions with Iran, rather than escalate them, the leadership in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have embraced strategies aimed at "[de-risking](#)" relations with Iran in the interest of promoting more peace and stability in the Gulf. This is a notable shift from the start of Trump's first term, when Riyadh and Abu Dhabi lobbied the White House to subject Iran to "maximum pressure" and hailed the decision to unilaterally [pull](#) the US out of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JCPOA) in May 2018.

Their perspectives on the first Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” agenda changed as a result of the missile and drone [attacks](#) against Saudi Aramco’s energy infrastructure in September 2019 and the [sabotage](#) off the UAE’s east coast a few months earlier. Those episodes were wake-up calls for GCC policymakers. These strikes and explosions drove home the stark reality that their countries are squarely in the crosshairs when Iran decides to strike back at those aligned with US-led campaigns to isolate and pressure Tehran. Iran’s loud and clear message was that proximity to Washington’s “maximum pressure” agenda comes with a price.

All countries in the neighborhood understand that if the Islamic Republic views them as facilitating any foreign attack on Iran, they stand to be targets of deadly retaliation carried out by Tehran or Iran-aligned non-state actors in the region. The GCC states are fully aware of how vulnerable they would be to any Iranian missile or drone operations against them, and therefore the Gulf Arab monarchies are determined to signal to Tehran that they will not be complicit in any Israeli and/or American attacks on Iran. Notably, the US did not carry out its military strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities on June 22 from any bases in GCC states.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s détente with Iran, combined with growing anger across the Arab world toward Israel in the post-October 7 environment, help explain why all the Gulf Arab monarchies quickly condemned Tel Aviv’s “Operation Rising Lion” on June 13 and called for restraint, diplomacy, and de-escalation. While Oman and Qatar would have probably reacted this way to an Israeli assault on Iran at any point in recent history, the responses from Saudi Arabia and the UAE speak to new realities in the Gulf that greatly contrast from previous times when Riyadh and Abu Dhabi urged the US to bomb Iran.

This is not to suggest that Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s leaders cease to perceive a serious Iranian threat, as they most definitely do. Yet, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have chosen to try to protect their countries from it through more dialogue with Iran and certain concessions to the Islamic Republic, which, for its part, has also embraced the opportunity to improve its relations with all GCC states as part of Tehran’s “[Neighbors First](#)” foreign policy strategy.

Perceptions of Trump 2.0

The eruption of the Israel-Iran war on June 13 left the GCC states facing difficult dilemmas while sharpening their scrutiny of the second Trump presidency. Now, with this new ceasefire in place, Gulf Arab leaders are measuring the White House's credibility not by rhetoric and optics, but by its capacity for consistent, measured diplomacy, which all GCC members want to see from Washington amid this delicate period.

Although Trump's recent Gulf [tour](#) in mid-May and emphasis on economic ties was broadly welcomed, his staunch backing of Israel's rogue behavior in the middle of the month raised alarms. For policymakers in GCC states, a US foreign policy that enabled Israel's unprovoked war on their Persian neighbor threatens the stability which they seek in the Gulf and the rest of the Middle East. Rather than desiring American leadership that is skilled with optics, the Gulf Arab leaders want to see a disciplined commitment to de-escalation and diplomacy on the part of a US president. Yet Gulf Arab leaders understand that Trump is unpredictable and assuming that he will keep pressure on Tel Aviv to remain in compliance with the fragile truce would be naïve.

No Choice but Diplomacy

The GCC states could not insulate themselves from the far-reaching consequences of the Israel-Iran war unfreezing with a collapse of the precarious ceasefire. Although the Islamic Republic did not fall and the Iranian nation-state did not disintegrate amid this month's Israel-Iran war, any scenario whereby there is state collapse in Iran would be nightmarish for the Gulf Arab monarchies and other countries nearby. Such a scenario would severely increase the risks of border instability, major refugee flows coming out of Iran, and violent extremists exploiting such chaos.

With the Strait of Hormuz serving as a vital artery for their oil and gas exports, any disruption—let alone a full closure—would constitute a catastrophic scenario. While the Iranians did not shut down the Strait of Hormuz earlier this month amid the 12-day war with Israel, a resumption of Tel Aviv and/or Washington's attacks against Iran could possibly prompt Tehran to take this bold move—another reason why GCC states have much at stake in terms of this ceasefire holding up and tensions cooling.

Overlooked is a profoundly serious environmental threat to public health and human survival along the Arabian Peninsula's Gulf coast, which a resumption of the Israel-Iran war would intensify. While addressing the United Nations Security Council on June 20, Rafael Mariano Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, issued a stark warning about the potential consequences of an Israeli strike on Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant. "I want to make it absolutely and completely clear," he [stated](#), "in case of an attack on the Bushehr nuclear power plant—a direct hit—it would result in a very high release of radioactivity to the environment."

For policymakers in the GCC, where all states except Saudi Arabia and Oman depend heavily on desalinated water drawn from the Gulf, the prospect of any accident at Bushehr has long been a source of grave [concern](#). Contamination of Gulf waters would effectively make cities such as Abu Dhabi, Doha, Dubai, and Manama uninhabitable.

Diplomacy is the Only Option

Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are pressing ahead with urgent diplomatic initiatives to try to see to it that this ceasefire between Israel and Iran endures, rather than serves as merely a pause at the start of what could be a long war. However, despite these efforts, the diplomatic landscape remains fraught. Deep mistrust continues to define the relationship between Tehran and the US/Israel, making sustained dialogue exceedingly difficult.

One of the most sobering developments casting doubt on the prospect of lasting stability is the growing likelihood that Iran will withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and pursue nuclear armament at full speed. In light of the events that have unfolded across the region since 2024, an increasing number of Iranians now view nuclear deterrence as their country's only reliable means of preventing future wars from reaching Iranian soil. This emerging reality is, in no small part, a consequence of the Trump administration's decision to allow Israeli actions to derail the American-Iranian diplomatic track that was active until June 13.

Despite the grim circumstances, some GCC states—along with Turkey and Iraq—will likely seek to build on Qatar's success in helping the White House cajole Tel Aviv and Tehran into a ceasefire this month by working to keep backchannels of communication available to the

American and Iranian leadership. The UAE, which in 2020 became the first Arab state in 26 years to announce its normalization of relations with Israel, could potentially leverage its ties with both Tel Aviv and Tehran to facilitate indirect dialogue between the Israeli and Iranian governments. But, of course, whether there is appetite on the American, Israeli, and Iranian sides for dialogue through such backchannels is another question.

Ultimately, it remains uncertain whether the diplomatic efforts of the GCC members and other regional actors can meaningfully sustain the fragile ceasefire. Yet, with the prospect of renewed hostilities between Israel and Iran and potential US involvement posing grave threats to their national security and economic stability, the Gulf Arab states have clear and compelling stakes in de-escalation. In the days and months ahead, their leaders and diplomats are likely to intensify efforts to foster dialogue across regional and global divides—working not only to preserve the current truce, but to anchor it within a broader framework of international consensus and long-term stability.

***image credit:** Anadolu Agency.

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