

Commentary

FIKER INSTITUTE'S AL-KHALEEJ FELLOWS REACT

The Iran War's Implications for the Gulf

The war that started on February 28 with joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran has since spilled over into a regional conflict, with Iranian missiles and drones targeting all six GCC states and energy supply disruptions causing global economic impacts. In light of this escalation, Fiker Institute's Al-Khaleej Fellows, Dr Khalid Al-Jufairi, Ahmed Buhejji, and Rumaitha Al Busaidi, react to the ongoing crisis and analyze its implications on the Arab Gulf states.

GULF HEDGING UNDER FIRE & THE SHAPING OF A NEW REGIONAL ORDER

Dr Khalid Al-Jufairi

Iran's retaliatory campaign against GCC states following the US-Israeli strikes on February 28 has accelerated a strategic recalibration already underway in Gulf foreign policy. Over the past decade, GCC governments have pursued strategic hedging, rather than exclusive alignment, by maintaining US security ties while diversifying diplomatic and economic partnerships. The current war, however, demonstrates both the necessity and the limits of this approach.

Iran's strikes, numbering hundreds of drones and missiles across the GCC states, were not only aimed at US military installations but also civilian infrastructure and energy facilities, despite public statements that GCC states' territories would not be used to launch offensive operations against Iran. This escalation confirms a long-standing reality: GCC states cannot fully insulate themselves from regional conflict even when they attempt diplomatic neutrality. Although the core deterrent in Gulf hedging behavior remains the United States, particularly against Iran's missile and naval capabilities, the GCC states' reliance on a single security patron now appears increasingly risky. The Trump administration's decisions are exposing GCC states to retaliation without prior consultation.

Consequently, GCC states are likely to deepen their multi-vector foreign policy approach along three key axes. Firstly, the GCC states are likely to expand their security architecture with Europe, namely France and United Kingdom, as well as Pakistan and Türkiye. They are also likely to strengthen energy flows and partnerships with China. Finally, they will continue to maintain diplomatic channels with US rivals, including Russia.

This re-oriented Gulf approach is not an attempt to replace the United States but to reduce vulnerability to shocks. It will thus be an adaptive response to its growing threats and uncertainty in a rapidly escalating regional environment.

INVISIBLE WARFARE & THE BATTLE FOR NARRATIVE CONTROL

Ahmed Buhejji

Wars today are fought not only with missiles, drones, and naval deployment but through the control of information, perception, and narrative, a form of invisible warfare that unfolds alongside the physical battlefield.

From the perspective of Gulf states, the present confrontation should not be understood as a regional conflict involving the GCC as a primary party. Rather, it is a situation in which Gulf states have been compelled to defend themselves against Iranian aggression and its regional spillover. For Tehran, however, the stakes appear far more existential. Iranian leadership increasingly frames the confrontation as a struggle for the survival of the Islamic Republic itself. In such circumstances, control of the narrative becomes a strategic instrument of national security.

Iran has long recognized the power of information control. During periods of domestic unrest and political crisis, Iranian authorities have repeatedly restricted internet access and imposed nationwide communication shutdowns in order to manage internal narratives and limit the spread of dissent. At the same time, social media has become a critical arena of influence. In recent weeks, fabricated reports of successful strikes and exaggerated claims regarding damage to Gulf infrastructure have circulated widely online, illustrating how misinformation can rapidly shape public perceptions both within affected societies and across the wider region.

Insights from political psychology and propaganda scholars suggest that audiences often interpret conflict through compelling narratives rather than verified information. Social media accelerates this dynamic, enabling emotionally charged content, produced by both state and non-state actors – and including misinformation and disinformation – to spread across borders within minutes. Information campaigns may also seek to mobilize sympathetic audiences across the region, amplifying narratives that reinforce existing political alignments.

During this ongoing crisis, narrative competition extends beyond social media, as official statements on Iran by major powers have proven to shape escalation perceptions, diplomatic signaling, and global energy market volatility. For Gulf states, the challenge is therefore not only military defense but information resilience. Countering misinformation, documenting attacks accurately, and maintaining public trust have become essential components of national security. In an era where perception can travel faster than missiles, safeguarding the information environment has become a strategic imperative for regional stability.

WAR AS SYSTEMS SHOCK: ENERGY, FOOD, WATER SECURITY

Rumaitha Al Busaidi

A common error in reading the Strait of Hormuz crisis is to treat it as an oil story alone. The Strait carries around 20% of global oil and LNG and roughly a third of traded fertilizers. Disruption here extends beyond energy markets into food systems through agricultural inputs, rising import costs, and supply pressures that can reach vulnerable economies far beyond the Strait, particularly across South Asia and East Africa. In the Gulf, where water security is tied to energy-intensive desalination and water-intensive industry, disruptions to shipping and energy infrastructure become a broader systems shock, with consequences for food supply, electricity, and freshwater availability.

A systems shock of this kind also tests statecraft. GCC states had invested heavily in diplomacy and repeatedly signaled that their territories would not be used to launch strikes against Iran. Even so, civilian and energy infrastructure still came under attack. Diplomatic efforts remain important, yet resilience ultimately depends on contingency plans, interconnection, and the capacity to keep critical systems running under stress.

This matters first for Gulf energy security and from there for future transition ambitions. The present crisis has exposed the cost of relying on fragmented national work-arounds instead of deeper regional integration. The GCC states have made progress on electricity interconnection, yet the wider infrastructure needed to protect energy flows, water security, and critical systems remains incomplete. The real test is whether this crisis finally converts collective resilience from a familiar warning and repeatedly acknowledged vulnerability into a shared strategic priority.

About the Authors

Dr Khalid Al-Jufairi, Ahmed Buhejji, and Rumaitha Al Busaidi are Fiker Institute's inaugural Al-Khaleej Fellows. As part of the Institute's Al-Khaleej Program, they advance regional analysis on Arab Gulf states' foreign policy.

**Fiker Institute's Al-Khaleej Fellows
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for the Gulf**

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