

*Report*

# WORKING GROUP ON GULF FOREIGN POLICY

---

*Meeting I: Key Takeaways*

## ABOUT THE WORKING GROUP

Fiker Institute, as part of its Al-Khaleej Program, launched the Working Group on Gulf Foreign Policy in March 2026 in response to the ongoing Iran War. The Group seeks to establish a coordination mechanism that convenes expert voices from the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to exchange views on the current developments and the future policy trajectories of the GCC states.

The Group's meetings and outcome reports will also serve an archival purpose, documenting the events of the ongoing war from the perspectives of the Arab Gulf States themselves. The Working Group's first meeting was held on March 16, 2026, and brought together Khaleeji academics, journalists, and analysts.

The takeaways below are a summary of the discussions that took place during the meeting. The summary reflects multiple perspectives, and does not represent a unified view of all participants.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### *On the reliability & long-term sustainability of the Gulf's security architecture*

Though perspectives diverged in their assessments and projections, there was clear consensus that the Gulf's existing security architecture is structurally vulnerable, an underlying condition that recent developments did not create, but rather exposed in stark terms. The Arab Gulf States have advocated against the war, but have found themselves caught in the middle of it through Iran's egregious attacks on all six countries, including on vital civilian infrastructure. Doubt was placed in the efficacy of their deterrence, given how quickly the Gulf countries were drawn into the war. Being able to effectively defend oneself is a different question to one's capacity to prevent the war from breaking out in the first place.

The dilemma exposed by the GCC states' reliance on the US places renewed scrutiny on the durability of the Gulf's security relationship with Washington. Hosting US military infrastructure enhances deterrence while increasing exposure to retaliation. Recent regional hostilities have underscored that continued and long-term US engagement cannot be assumed, necessitating a more proactive approach by GCC governments to develop a politically sustainable and strategically coherent security framework. Even prior to the war, Gulf states had pursued expanding economic and defense ties with emerging powers, including India, Pakistan, China, and Russia. Diversified partnerships could be further strengthened, particularly in targeted areas of military procurement and capability development, including cooperation with Ukraine on drone defense systems and with France and the United Kingdom on aerial support.

At the same time, a full and swift realignment away from the US remains unlikely. Despite its weaknesses, there is no viable substitute or comparable security umbrella to that of the US. Moreover, this crisis has reaffirmed the operational effectiveness of US-supplied defensive systems. Rather than pursuing complete substitution, GCC states are likely to adopt a more calibrated and diversified strategy that considers the comparative advantage of different partners.

The crisis has also exposed underlying fault lines within existing regional alliances. This includes, for instance, disappointment within Gulf policy circles regarding the wider Arab world's delayed response. At the multilateral level, the response has largely aligned with GCC positions. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2817 (2026), co-sponsored by 136 states, called for the support of the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence of the GCC states and Jordan, and condemned Iran's attacks. The resolution, which was tabled by Bahrain following discussions at an extraordinary GCC ministerial meeting, showed the importance of collective diplomacy

among and by Gulf states. Russia and China's abstentions also highlighted the limits of relying on alternative Great Powers. With no clear legal framework established by the resolution, the question of how and whether the UNSC can shape a more concrete outcome in the war remains open.

### ***On the Gulf's collective self-defense & intra-bloc alignment***

The exposure of these structural dilemmas has intensified calls for the immediate operationalization of a collective GCC defense framework. Especially for smaller Gulf states, coordinated action to establish credible deterrence, enhance security coordination, and strengthen strategic autonomy is increasingly imperative. The current hostilities highlight the pressing necessity for such a joint framework, especially if the conflict continues to escalate.

While intra-GCC disagreements have been set aside in response to the present crisis, the bloc is yet to establish a unified foreign policy orientation or aligned world view. The challenge is therefore not only institutional but conceptual as well. Notably, even the existential threat posed by the 1990–1991 Gulf War did not produce a durable, unified security posture. Any meaningful move toward collective defense would require full participation across all six GCC states, alongside greater alignment on national positions, threat perceptions, and domestic constraints.

At the same time, there are inherent risks in over-regionalizing the current conflict by placing primary responsibility for security solely on the GCC. The disruption of the Strait of Hormuz shows that the crisis is a global one, therefore, the burden of regional security cannot be exclusively localized in the short and medium term. Moreover, the dynamics of the conflict reflect a broader fragmentation of the international order itself.

Nevertheless, there remain critical domains in which enhanced GCC coordination can deliver tangible value. Chief among these is the strengthening of regional infrastructure resilience, particularly in light of shared vulnerabilities and uneven levels of preparedness across member states. A more coordinated approach would enable more efficient crisis response mechanisms. A joint recovery framework will also be essential in shaping post-war strategies across the Gulf. The war has generated, and will continue to generate, differentiated economic and strategic impacts across the GCC. In Bahrain, fiscal stabilization will be a priority, while in the UAE, investor confidence and revitalizing the tourism sector will be central. In Qatar, efforts will likely focus on rebuilding its capacity and credibility as a regional mediator. These are all challenges that are best tackled in coordination.

The risks of the GCC's military involvement were also debated. The implications of offensive action were weighed against the costs of inaction. If the conflict further escalates,

not responding militarily carries the risk of not having effective deterrence in the future.

### ***On contingency planning & disruptions of critical systems***

The risks of escalation are manifold and particularly acute for critical civilian infrastructure, including energy, food, and water systems. For the Gulf states, water security is uniquely vulnerable, given energy-intensive desalination processes. The further targeting of desalination plants and vital energy infrastructure needed to power them could have disastrous implications for the habitability of many cities in the Gulf. Even in relatively better-prepared states, structural limitations persist.

The crisis in the Strait of Hormuz further highlights the degree to which stability in the Gulf depends on a single maritime corridor, not only for oil exports but also for food security. This has become a key example of how regional instability immediately translates into systemic economic and supply-chain disruptions. The implications extend well beyond the immediate conflict zone, also affecting states and populations with limited geographic proximity to the crisis. In particular, the disruption of fertilizer transmission through the Strait will shape agricultural outcomes well into 2027, with consequences for both regional and international food security.

## PARTICIPANTS

The first Working Group meeting was attended by:

- **Ahmed Buhejji** (Bahrain), First Secretary at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain & Al-Khaleej Fellow at Fiker Institute
- **Dr Alanoud Alsharekh** (Kuwait), Director of Ibtakar Strategic Consultancy
- **Dr Bader Al-Saif** (Kuwait), President of Al-Saif Consulting
- **Dubai Abulhoul** (UAE), Founder of Fiker Institute
- **Faisal Abbas** (Saudi Arabia), Editor-in-Chief of Arab News
- **Dr Hasan Alhasan** (Bahrain), Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies
- **Dr Haya Al-Noaimi** (Qatar), Assistant Professor at Northwestern University in Qatar
- **Dr Khalid Al-Jufairi** (Qatar), Adjunct Associate Professor at Georgetown University in Qatar & Al-Khaleej Fellow at Fiker Institute
- **Mahdi Jasim Ghuloom** (Bahrain), Junior Fellow in Geopolitics at the Observer Research Foundation – Middle East
- **Mohammed Baharoon** (UAE), Director General of b’huth – Dubai Public Policy Research Center
- **Rumaitha Al Busaidi** (Oman), Vice President of the Environment Society of Oman & Al-Khaleej Fellow at Fiker Institute
- **Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi** (UAE), Founder of Barjeel Art Foundation

**Working Group on Gulf  
Foreign Policy**

March 2026

The statements made and  
views expressed do not  
represent Fiker Institute.

Copyright ©2026 Fiker Institute,  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Please contact Fiker Institute for  
permission to reproduce any part  
of the content of this report.

Email: [info@fikerinstitute.org](mailto:info@fikerinstitute.org)