



Deconstructing the Complexity of the situation for GCC citizens during the US-Israeli War on Iran

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.41

Volume: 05

Issue: 02

Received: 09-01-2026

Accepted: 11-02-2026

Published: 22-03-2026

Page No: 183-198

Abstract

The onset of the US-Israeli military campaign against Iran in 2026 has precipitated a profound and multifaceted crisis for the citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This paper deconstructs the unique complexity of this predicament, arguing that GCC citizens are trapped in a paralysing geopolitical vice. They face the immediate, tangible threat of Iranian retaliation for hosting US military assets, manifested in direct strikes on their civilian and energy infrastructure.

Simultaneously, GCC citizens fear that US, Israeli and Iranian strategic ambitions are being pursued at the expense of Gulf sovereignty and long-term stability. This dual pressure has shattered the region's long-standing strategy of neutrality, creating an existential crisis that extends beyond geopolitics to threaten the economic "safe haven" model, and might raise the possibility for internal social fault lines, besides imposing both a severe psychological toll and the long-standing socioeconomic development progression.

Drawing on an analysis of the strategic dilemmas, socioeconomic disruptions, and shifting psychological landscape, this paper deconstructs the layered nature of the crisis. It argues that the path forward requires not only coordinated collective security and economic resilience but also a fundamental redefinition of the social contract. The conclusion explores the potential for this crucible to forge a new kind of "hardiness" among GCC citizens—one characterized by enhanced agency, collective efficacy, and a more resilient, self-reliant national identity, should both state and society navigate the crisis with transparency and unity.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2026.5.2.183-198>

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Citizen, US-Israel-Iran War, Geopolitical Complexity, Security Dilemma, Economic Vulnerability, National Resilience, Hardiness

1. Introduction

For decades, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have been defined by a singular strategic paradox: they are islands of remarkable stability in one of the world's most volatile regions. This stability was meticulously crafted through a dual strategy. Externally, it relied on a complex policy of hedging, maintaining deep security ties with the United States while fostering diplomatic and economic channels with a rival Iran, a balancing act that allowed it to mediate regional conflicts and insulate itself from great-power confrontation. Internally, this stability was underpinned by a powerful social contract where citizens traded political quiescence for unparalleled economic prosperity, safety, and a future-oriented national vision built on being global hubs for finance, tourism, and innovation. Magdy (2026)^[11]

This carefully constructed edifice in GCC has been fundamentally shattered by the war that began in March 2026. The direct military confrontation between Iran and a US-Israeli-led coalition has obliterated the GCC's ability to remain neutral. In a matter of days, the region's core assumption—that its territory would not be a battleground—was violently upended. Iran, justifying its actions by targeting US military assets on Gulf soil, has launched hundreds of missiles and drones at all six GCC states, striking critical energy infrastructure, international airports, and civilian areas. This direct assault has not only caused casualties and economic paralysis but has also eroded the very premise of Gulf neutrality that took decades to build. Magdy (2026)^[11] However, the crisis for GCC citizens is not simply one of an external aggressor. It is rendered exponentially more complex by a simultaneous and equally profound crisis of trust with their traditional allies. The 2025 Israeli strike on Doha and the unilateral nature of the US-led campaign against Iran have deepened a widespread suspicion that Washington and Jerusalem are using Gulf states as a “platform for a bigger war,” luring them into an open-ended conflict to serve their own strategic interests, only to abandon them when it becomes expedient. This creates a paralyzing dilemma: GCC citizens find themselves caught between a neighboring Iran actively striking their soil and an alliance of the US and Israel whose long-term intentions are viewed with deep suspicion. Hamzawy (2026)^[8], Leber (2026)^[10]. This paper deconstructs the multi-layered complexity of this situation for GCC citizens. It moves beyond a traditional geopolitical analysis to explore how this crisis is experienced at the security, economic, and psychological levels. It argues that the war presents an existential threat not just to the physical safety of the Gulf's population but to the foundational pillars of its post-oil future, its internal social cohesion, and its citizens' sense of identity and trust in their governing structures. By examining the collapse of neutrality, the alliance dilemma, and the disruption of the “safe haven” economic model, this paper will chart the contours of the current predicament. Finally, it will propose that while this moment represents the gravest challenge in the region's modern history, it also presents a critical juncture. The path to a stable future lies not in returning to the old paradigm of external dependency, but in forging a new form of national and regional resilience—a “hardiness”—that empowers citizens and states to navigate their own destiny in a fundamentally altered geopolitical landscape.

The Conversation (2026).

This paper argues that the current crisis represents not merely a geopolitical rupture but a fundamental breakdown of the social contract that has defined Gulf stability for half a century. The path to recovery requires not only military and economic adaptation but a reimagining of the relationship between citizen and state—one that transforms vulnerability into collective hardiness. Buheji (2023)^[2]

2. Literature Review

2.1. The complexity of the situation for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Citizens

The situation for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) citizens is exceptionally complex because they are trapped in a paralyzing geopolitical vise between two adversarial forces. On one side, they face the immediate and tangible threat of Iranian retaliation—hundreds of missiles and drones have already struck their cities, critical energy infrastructure, and civilian areas—as Tehran justifies these attacks by citing the presence of US military bases on Gulf soil, a justification that renders their governments' declared neutrality meaningless. On the other side, they harbour a deep and growing distrust of their nominal allies, the United States and Israel, whom they suspect are using Gulf territory as a platform for a broader war that serves foreign strategic ambitions rather than Gulf security, with no clear exit strategy or reliable commitment to long-term protection. Buheji (2021)^[1]

This dual pressure has shattered the foundational pillars of Gulf stability: the economic “safe haven” model that attracted global investment and talent is now threatened by reputational damage and infrastructure vulnerability; the social contract that exchanged citizen acquiescence for state-provided security and prosperity is eroding as governments prove unable to prevent attacks; and citizens find themselves caught between an aggressive neighbor and unreliable allies, forced to navigate a crisis not of their making while bearing its human, economic, and psychological costs. Leber (2026)^[10], Buheji (2026)^[5]

GCC citizens amid the current war on Iran find themselves caught between a neighbouring Iran that is actively striking their soil and the US-led alliance, whose long-term intentions are viewed with deep suspicion. This has created a multi-layered crisis where the immediate threat from Iran clashes with a fundamental distrust of Israel and the United States, leaving Gulf states and their citizens in a precarious position. Hamzawy (2026)^[8]

Table 1: Summarizes the Primary Pressures Shaping GCC Complex Landscape

Dimension of Complexity	Description of the Dilemma for GCC Citizens	Key Drivers & Recent Events
Immediate Security Threat	Direct attacks from Iran have shattered the sense of safety and neutrality, forcing a potential shift from mediation to confrontation	Iranian strikes on civilian and energy infrastructure in Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman
Deepening Distrust of Allies	There is a widespread fear that the US and Israel are luring them into a war to serve their own interests, only to abandon them when it serves their purpose.	The 2025 Israeli strike on Doha, coupled with unreliable US security guarantees, has intensified this suspicion.
Economic & Existential Anxiety	The war threatens to dismantle the “safe haven” economic model and expose internal sectarian fault lines, risking long-term instability.	Attacks on critical infrastructure like the Ras Tanura refinery and Ras Laffan energy facilities.

2.2 The Collapse of Neutrality: Iran as an Immediate Threat

For years, GCC states pursued a policy of hedging and mediation with Iran, hoping to de-escalate tensions and

protect their sovereignty. This was based on a “gentlemen's agreement” where the GCC territory would not be used to attack Iran in exchange for Iranian non-aggression. However, Iran believes that this strategy has collapsed with recent US

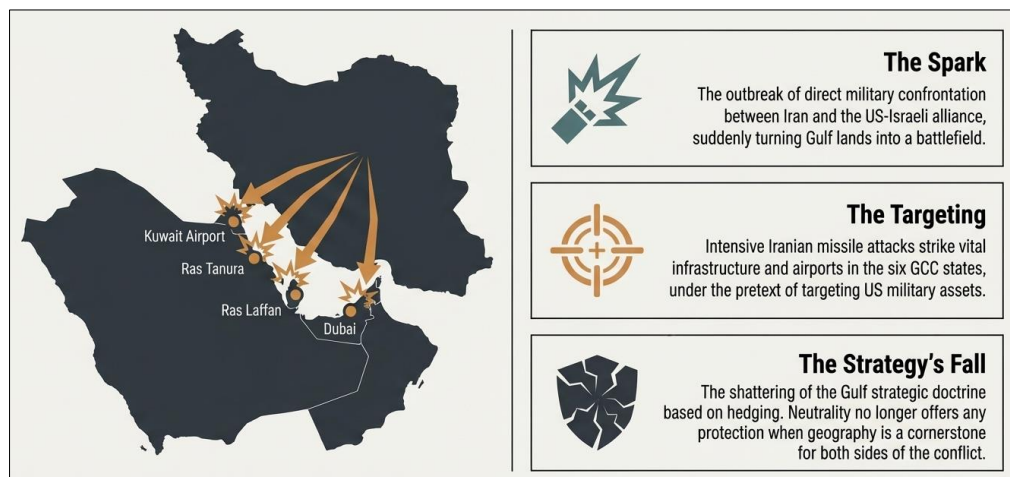
military actions against its regime.

In the conflict that started in March 2026, Iran has launched hundreds of missiles and drones at all GCC states, including civilian areas. These strikes have targeted critical infrastructure such as Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura refinery, all the GCC airports starting with Kuwait International Airport, and energy facilities in Qatar's Ras Laffan. The attacks have caused fatalities, injuries, and significant economic disruption. Magdy (2026)^[11]

Tehran justifies these actions by stating they are targeting US military assets based in Gulf countries. However, this distinction has been lost on Arab leaders and citizens, who

view it as a "disproportionate barrage" that violates their sovereignty and reveals Iranian arrogance. As a result, former mediators like Qatar and Oman, which were spared in the past, have also been hit, eroding the very premise of Gulf neutrality. Hamzawy (2026)^[8]

This perceived betrayal is pushing GCC states towards a more unified and potentially confrontational stance. For instance, the UAE has closed its embassy in Tehran, and there is talk of a coordinated military response if the attacks continue. For citizens, this means their leaders are being forced to abandon a decades-long policy of neutrality to protect national honour and security. Hamzawy (2026)^[8]



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Fig 1: Illustrates the Pressures that are Risking Neutrality

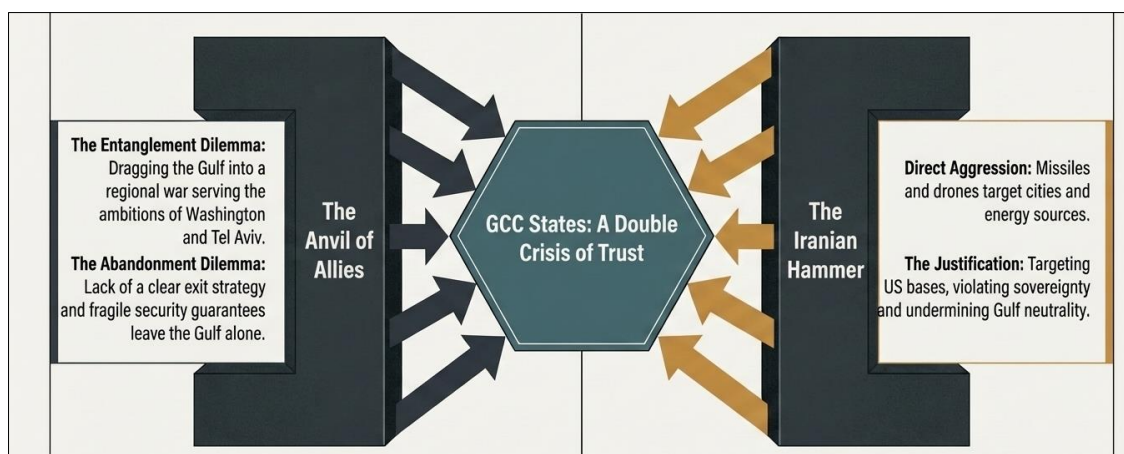
2.3. The Alliance Dilemma: Distrust of the US and Israel

While the immediate anger is directed at Iran, there is a simultaneous and deeply rooted suspicion of the United States and Israel. This creates a paralyzing dilemma: do you align with a neighbour attacking you or with allies whose motives you distrust?

The perception of Israel in the Gulf is rapidly shifting. The 2025 Israeli strike on Doha, Qatar, which killed a GCC citizen, was a watershed moment that fundamentally altered the threat calculus for Gulf states. Many now view Israel's military actions as part of a fanatical, expansionist agenda to establish regional hegemony, backed by the US, rather than a force for stability. The ongoing war in Gaza and its high

civilian toll further inflame public opinion and pressure Gulf governments not to be seen as siding with Israel. There is a growing fear among Gulf analysts and officials that the US and Israel are setting a "trap". Magdy (2026)^[11]

This leaves GCC citizens with the uneasy feeling that their countries are being treated as a "platform for a bigger war", Buheji (2026)^[5]. They are bearing the economic and human costs of a conflict not of their making, forced to defend US bases on their soil while their own safety is compromised. The Houthi viewpoint, for instance, explicitly frames this as Gulf regimes "shamefully" defending US-Zionist bases against fellow Muslims.



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Fig 2: Shows the Geopolitical Trap between Iran and US-Israeli

2.4. The Existential Crisis: Economy and Internal Stability

Beyond geopolitics, the war poses an existential threat to the very model of GCC society and its future. For years, Gulf states have built their post-oil future on being oases of stability, attracting global talent, tourism, and investment. Scenes of missiles striking luxury hotels in Dubai, fires at airports, and the shutdown of LNG production directly contradict this carefully crafted image. If global firms no longer see the Gulf region as safe for data centers or regional headquarters, the economic diversification plans central to "Vision" strategies are at grave risk. The Express Tribune (2026) ^[18].

The conflict threatens to exacerbate internal divisions. In countries like Bahrain, the war has sparked protests among Shia populations, this creates an uncomfortable environment where national unity is tested by external conflict. For GCC leaders, the inability to prevent their territories from becoming a battleground, despite massive defense spending and close US ties, is a source of vulnerability that needs to be mitigated. Citizens are expecting that their leaders can navigate this crisis, through strong air defenses that would prevent destruction and fatal injuries. Buheji and Ahmed (2019) ^[6]

In summary, the complexity for a GCC citizen lies in navigating a no-win scenario. They face the tangible reality of being attacked by Iran, while simultaneously fearing that their nominal allies, mainly the US, is exploiting their land for a broader war with no regard for their long-term safety or prosperity.

2.5. Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding the Crisis

To deepen the analytical rigor of this study, it is useful to situate the crisis within established theoretical frameworks from international relations and political sociology. Three interlocking frameworks provide particularly valuable lenses.

2.5.1. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003) ^[7], RSCT posits that security dynamics are shaped by geographically clustered states whose primary security concerns are so interlinked that they cannot be analyzed in isolation. The Gulf region constitutes a classic regional security complex, characterized by intense patterns of amity and enmity among states, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. What makes the current crisis distinctive is the deep penetration of external powers—principally the United States and Israel—into this complex. RSCT helps explain why GCC states cannot simply "opt out" of the conflict: their geography and the presence of US military assets on their soil bind them inextricably to the security dynamics of the region, regardless of their declared neutrality. Buheji and Ahmed (2019) ^[6]

2.5.2. The Alliance Dilemma (Abandonment vs. Entrapment)

Glenn Snyder's (1984) ^[16] concept of the alliance dilemma captures the predicament of states in asymmetric alliances. Smaller allies face a persistent fear of two competing dangers: *abandonment* by their powerful patron, leaving them exposed to threats; and *entrapment*, being drawn into conflicts initiated by the patron that serve its interests rather than their own. This framework precisely captures the GCC's

current predicament. The fear of abandonment stems from a perceived lack of a clear US exit strategy and unreliable security guarantees. The fear of entrapment manifests in the suspicion that the US and Israel are using Gulf territory as a platform for a war that primarily serves their strategic ambitions, with the Gulf states left to bear the consequences of Iranian retaliation.

2.5.3. Reviewing the GCC Social Contract

Political sociologists have long characterized Gulf states as "rentier states"—states that derive a substantial portion of their revenue from external sources (in this case, oil and gas rents) rather than from domestic taxation, Oxford Economic (2025) ^[13]. This economic structure has historically supported a distinctive social contract: citizens forgo political participation in exchange for extensive state-provided benefits, employment, and security. The current crisis threatens this contract on multiple fronts. Economic diversification strategies—the "Vision" agendas central to post-oil futures—require the stability that the war has eroded. The Express Tribune (2026) ^[18].

As the contract frays, new forms of citizen-state engagement may emerge, whether toward greater participation or toward alienation. These three frameworks collectively illuminate the structural forces that constrain and shape the choices available to GCC states and their citizens. They reveal that the current crisis is not merely a momentary disruption but a confluence of regional security dynamics, asymmetric alliance pressures, and the potential unravelling of the foundational social contract that has defined Gulf governance for generations. Buheji (2025) ^[4, 5]

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design to deconstruct the complex and multidimensional nature of the crisis facing GCC citizens during the US-Israeli-Iran war. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the conflict and the scarcity of primary quantitative data at this early stage, a qualitative approach is most appropriate for capturing the nuanced perceptions, strategic dilemmas, and socio-psychological dimensions that form the core of this analysis. The research adopts a case-study approach, treating the six GCC states as an interconnected geopolitical unit while acknowledging their distinct national contexts. This allows for the identification of shared patterns of vulnerability and response while preserving sensitivity to intra-GCC differences. The analysis is structured around three analytical levels: the security-strategic dimension, the economic-existential dimension, and the socio-psychological dimension. This multi-level framework enables a holistic understanding of how the crisis manifests across different domains of citizen experience. Oxford Economic (2025) ^[13]

3.2. Data Sources

Data for this study are drawn from three primary categories of sources:

3.2.1. Policy and Think Tank Reports

Publications from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the International Crisis Group, and the Gulf International Forum provide expert analysis of the strategic dimensions of the conflict.

3.2.2. Official Statements and Government Communications

Public statements from GCC ministries, the GCC Secretariat, the United Nations, and relevant international actors are analyzed to trace official positions and policy shifts.

3.2.3. Media and Journalistic Accounts

Regional and international news coverage from outlets including Al Jazeera, The National, Reuters, and Associated Press provides real-time reporting on events, civilian experiences, and public sentiment. Where possible, multiple sources are cross-referenced to verify factual claims.

3.2.4. Economic Data

Reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Oxford Economics, and regional central banks provide baseline economic indicators against which

the impact of the crisis can be assessed.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through three stages. First, the paper deconstructs the crisis into its constituent dimensions—security, economic, and socio-psychological—using the iceberg model (Figure 2) to distinguish surface-level events from deeper structural conditions. Second, it applies a dilemma analysis framework to examine the strategic choices facing GCC states and citizens, particularly the tension between alignment with the US-led coalition and the pursuit of autonomous security. Third, it synthesizes these findings to project potential trajectories and identify pathways toward resilience, culminating in the concept of "hardiness" as a framework for understanding potential transformations in state-society relations. Buheji (2023) ^[2]

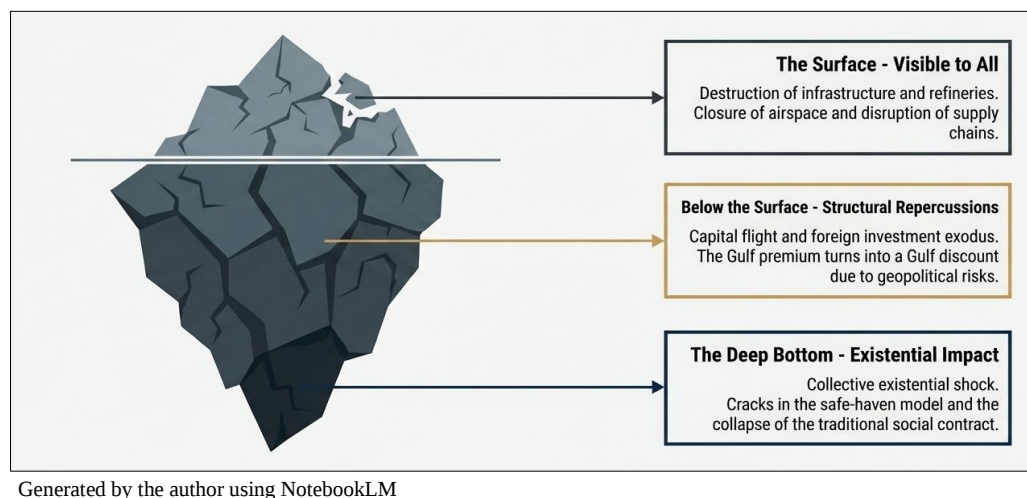


Fig 3: Illustrates the Depth of the US-Israel-Iran Conflict on GCC

3.4. Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. The conflict is ongoing, and events continue to unfold, meaning that any analysis represents a snapshot in time rather than a final assessment. The reliance on secondary sources means that the perspectives of ordinary GCC citizens are filtered through media and analyst representations rather than captured through direct ethnographic engagement. Future research would benefit from surveys, interviews, and longitudinal studies as the situation stabilizes. Additionally, the sensitivity of the subject matter may limit the

availability of certain official data.

4. Application & Analysis

4.1. Divergent Vulnerabilities: A Comparative Lens

While the GCC states face a shared crisis, their specific vulnerabilities, capacities, and strategic postures differ significantly. Acknowledging these differences is essential for understanding the differentiated experiences of citizens across the region. Table (2) shows a comparison of the vulnerabilities and the capacities for each GCC state. Young (2026) ^[20]

Table 2: Comparative National GCC Vulnerabilities and Capacities

State	Key Vulnerability	Strategic Asset	Domestic Pressure Point
Saudi Arabia	Largest US military footprint; world's largest oil exporter; Shia-populated Eastern Province	Regional leadership; Vision 2030 economic transformation	Internal stability; succession politics
UAE	Global business hub reputation; dense expatriate population; Dubai tourism economy	Economic diversification; diplomatic agility	Reputational risk; foreign investment dependence
Qatar	Mediation capital; LNG export vulnerability; Al Udeid Air Base hosts US Central Command	High Wealth per capita; global LNG market share (20%)	Over-reliance on single energy sector; small population
Kuwait	Earlier-Parliamentary politics constrains rapid response; proximity to Iran; Previous Tensions with Iraq and Iran	One of World Leading Sovereign wealth fund; constitutional tradition	Political gridlock; sectarian sensitivities
Oman	Traditional mediator role discredited; limited military capacity	Geographically positioned, controlling the Strait of Hormuz; a long history of neutrality	A bit high in Economic fragility, Good relations with Iran
Bahrain	Small land mass; Sectarian tensions are high; US Fifth Fleet headquarters	Financial services sector; US strategic commitment	Internal stability; High Debt compared to GDP, sectarian sensitivities

4.2. GCC Citizens' Dilemma

The dilemma facing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) citizens is not merely a foreign policy challenge but a multi-dimensional crisis that strikes at the heart of their national security, economic future, and social fabric. The situation has evolved from a managed geopolitical rivalry into an acute, multifaceted predicament that demands both immediate responses and long-term strategic solutions.

To understand the full scope of the dilemma, it's essential to break it down into its core components. The crisis is not monolithic; it operates on three distinct but interconnected levels: the security, economic, and political-psychological dimensions.

The foundation of GCC foreign policy for decades has been a strategy of hedging and neutrality. This approach, which involved maintaining diplomatic and economic ties with both the US and Iran, was designed to protect Gulf states from being caught in the crossfire of great power and regional conflicts. However, the current war has shattered this paradigm. Leber (2026)^[10].

4.3. Distinct Strategic Postures

The crisis has revealed divergent strategic calculations. Qatar and Oman, having invested most heavily in mediation and diplomatic channels with Iran, have seen their strategic capital most dramatically devalued. Their citizens experience a particular sense of betrayal: the very policy of engagement that was meant to ensure security has failed to protect them.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as the largest economies and most prominent US allies, bear the highest reputational and economic risks. Their diversification strategies—Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's economic transformation—are most directly threatened by perceptions of regional instability. For their citizens, the crisis threatens not only immediate safety but the future opportunities promised by these national visions. Kuwait faces unique political constraints. Its active parliament and tradition of political contestation mean that government responses are subject to greater public scrutiny and debate. This can be a source of both resilience—public legitimacy—and paralysis—delayed decision-making. The Express Tribune (2026)^[18].

Bahrain faces the most acute internal pressures. Its Shia-majority population and history of unrest (particularly the 2011 uprising) create a domestic vulnerability that other GCC states do not share to the same degree. For Bahraini citizens, the external conflict with Iran cannot be separated from long-standing sectarian tensions. Besides, the country cannot financially and economically stand a prolonged war with budget that is in debt. Young (2026)^[20], IMF (2026)^[9]

4.4. Implications for Citizens

For citizens, these divergent national contexts shape their experience of the crisis. A Saudi citizen's primary concern may be the continuity of Vision 2030 economic reforms; a Qatari citizen may mourn the loss of the country's unique role as a regional mediator; a Bahraini citizen navigates a crisis where external conflict intersects with internal divisions. Any comprehensive understanding of the crisis must account for this heterogeneity while recognizing the shared experience of vulnerability that binds the region together.

4.5. The Neutrality Paradox

Iran has justified its attacks on GCC states by citing the presence of US military bases on their soil. From Tehran's perspective, hosting American forces makes Gulf countries legitimate military targets. Yet, these same states explicitly declared their neutrality and refused to allow their territory to be used for offensive operations against Iran. This has created a cruel paradox: neutrality offers no protection when you are geographically and strategically indispensable to one side of the conflict.

While Iran claims to target only US military assets, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Attacks have struck Kuwait International Airport, luxury hotels in Dubai, residential buildings in Bahrain, and critical energy facilities across Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This has led to civilian casualties, with at least four killed and over one hundred injured in the initial days of the war. For GCC citizens, the distinction between military and civilian targets has become meaningless, as their daily lives and safety are directly threatened.

Countries like Qatar and Oman invested heavily in their roles as indispensable mediators. Qatar hosted talks between various factions and maintained channels with both Washington and Tehran, while Oman facilitated multiple rounds of US-Iran nuclear negotiations. This diplomatic capital has been severely depleted. As one analysis notes, when the territory of neutral actors is attacked, it "erodes the very premise that allows them to serve as intermediaries". The very countries best positioned to de-escalate the conflict have been discredited as impartial parties.

4.6. The Economic Dimension- Challenging the "Safe Haven" Legacy

The GCC states, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have spent years and billions of dollars crafting a narrative: they are oases of stability in a turbulent region, safe havens for global capital, talent, and tourism. This economic model is now under direct assault. The attacks have caused physical damage to critical infrastructure. Saudi Arabia's largest oil refinery was put out of commission, and Qatar, which supplies 20% of the global LNG market, was forced to shut down exports after its facilities were targeted. The closure of two of the world's busiest aviation hubs—Doha and Dubai—due to airspace shutdowns has disrupted global travel and supply chains. Vietnam.VN (2026)^[19]

Perhaps more damaging than the physical destruction is the psychological impact on global investors. As a Carnegie Endowment analysis warns, "attracting tourists, building and operating data centers, and sustaining complex logistical hubs is difficult in the middle of an active war zone". The carefully cultivated image of stability has been replaced with images of missiles striking luxury developments and fires near international airports. Global firms may now reconsider placing regional headquarters, data centers, or critical AI infrastructure in the Gulf. Leber (2026)^[10]

The economic burden of active warfare is staggering. It is exponentially more expensive to intercept Iranian projectiles with sophisticated missile defense systems than it is for Iran to produce and launch them. This asymmetry means that even a "successful" defense comes at an enormous and unsustainable financial cost, draining resources that were

earmarked for diversification and development projects like Saudi Vision 2030.

Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly 20% of the world's traded oil flows, represents an existential economic weapon. By striking oil tankers and threatening this chokepoint, Tehran can directly impact Gulf energy exports and global markets, holding the entire region's economy hostage.

5. Expanded Psychological Impact

5.1. The Political-Psychological Dimension: Trapped and Distrusted

Beyond the physical and economic impacts, there is a profound psychological and political toll on GCC citizens and their relationship with their own governments and foreign allies. Citizens are caught in a classic catch. Aligning with the US-led coalition risks drawing further Iranian retaliation and being seen as complicit in a war they did not choose. Yet, not retaliating against Iranian attacks is perceived as weakness and leaves their countries vulnerable to continued aggression. Leber (2026)^[10]

The suspicion that the US and Israel are pursuing their own agendas at the expense of Gulf stability has intensified. The perception that Gulf states are being treated as a "platform for a bigger war" is widespread. Citizens question why they should bear the risk of hosting US forces when Washington seems "unable or unwilling to protect the Gulf from Iranian attacks". The Israeli strike on Doha in 2025, which killed a GCC citizen, remains a fresh wound that fundamentally altered the perception of Israel from a potential partner to a direct threat. Therefore, GCC citizens are increasingly

questioning how the close security ties with the US are unable to prevent their territories from becoming battlegrounds.

5.2. Collective Trauma and the Remaking of Identity

The concept of collective trauma refers to a shared psychological wound experienced by a community in response to an overwhelming event that shatters fundamental assumptions about safety, meaning, and social order. For GCC citizens, the war constitutes such an event. The foundational assumption that the Gulf was an oasis of stability—a place apart from the region's conflicts—has been shattered. This loss of ontological security—the confidence that the world is predictable and meaningful—is itself a form of trauma.

Beyond the measurable economic and security impacts, the crisis imposes profound psychological costs that will shape Gulf society for years, perhaps generations. Understanding these psychological dimensions is essential for comprehending the full scope of the crisis and the pathways toward resilience.

Research on collective trauma suggests that communities exposed to shared violence can respond in divergent ways. Some fractures along pre-existing fault lines, with trust eroding and social cohesion disintegrating. Others experience a process of "post-traumatic growth," emerging with strengthened social bonds, clarified values, and enhanced collective efficacy. The trajectory is shaped by how the crisis is managed—by the transparency of authorities, the presence of mutual aid networks, and the availability of narratives that make meaning out of suffering. Senoussi *et al.* (2026)^[15]



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Fig 4: Illustrate the Collective Trauma and Uncertainty Created by the Conflict

5.3. Intergenerational Transmission

The children who are experiencing missile strikes, sirens, and family fear during this crisis will carry these memories into adulthood. Research on conflict-affected populations demonstrates that childhood exposure to violence shapes political attitudes, trust in institutions, and psychological well-being across the life course. For Gulf children who have known only stability and prosperity, this crisis represents a rupture that will likely influence their political consciousness in ways that are not yet fully visible.

A Kuwaiti grandfather's account in the earlier analysis—describing one granddaughter panicked while the other

treated explosions "almost like a festival"—captures the unpredictable ways children process violence. Both responses, however, represent a fundamental departure from the childhood experiences of previous generations.

5.4. The Psychology of the Alliance Dilemma

The dual experience of being attacked by Iran while suspecting betrayal by US and Israeli allies creates a distinctive psychological burden. Social psychology research on trust and betrayal indicates that the violation of trust by an ally is often more psychologically damaging than the hostility of an adversary, because it challenges the individual's

capacity to make reliable judgments about who is safe and who is dangerous. For GCC citizens, this double betrayal—by both neighbor and ally—creates a profound orientation of skepticism that may persist long after the immediate conflict subsides.

5.5. Pathways to Resilience

Despite these psychological burdens, the crisis also creates conditions for the development of what psychologists term "hardiness"—a personality disposition characterized by viewing stressors as challenges rather than threats, maintaining a sense of control, and deepening commitment to one's community. The spontaneous mutual aid that emerged in the crisis's immediate aftermath, the quiet pride in national defense teams, and the determination to continue daily life despite fear all represent seeds of such hardiness. Whether these seeds flourish or wither will depend on the leadership, transparency, and social cohesion that emerge in the coming months. Buheji (2023) ^[2]

5.6. The Strategic Miscalculations: Who Is Responsible?

Understanding the current crisis requires acknowledging the strategic errors made by multiple actors. This is not a one-sided failure.

Iran failed to seize opportunities for a nuclear agreement with the US while the window for negotiations was still open, a step that "could have spared the region further tension and instability". By attacking Gulf states despite their repeated

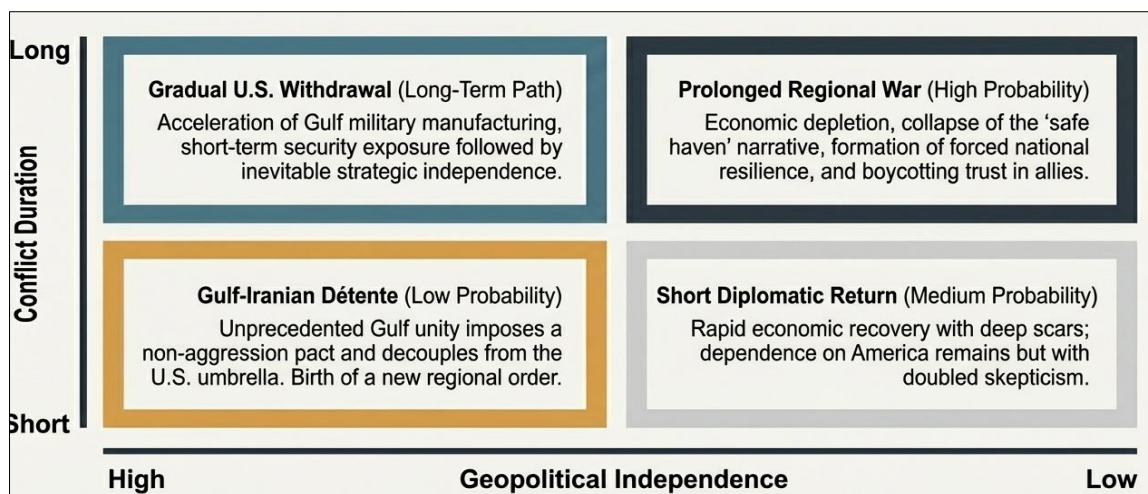
assurances of neutrality, Iran has "jeopardized the residual goodwill that made quiet crisis management possible". These were precisely the countries that had invested political capital in de-escalation and maintaining channels of communication with Tehran. Buheji (2025) ^[4, 5]

Iran's decision to target all GCC states indiscriminately has backfired strategically. A more limited escalation that targeted only a few states might have exacerbated existing divisions within the GCC. Instead, shared victimhood has created unprecedented unity, with Gulf states coordinating their responses and threatening collective retaliation.

5.7. The US-Israel Approach and Consequences on GCC

The US and Israel initiated strikes on Iran without adequately considering the consequences for Gulf allies. This unilateral action has left GCC states to bear the brunt of Iranian retaliation for a war they did not start. The attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities have raised serious concerns under international humanitarian law, which prohibits targeting nuclear installations due to the risk of radioactive contamination. The GCC has explicitly condemned these actions as a "clear violation of international law and the United Nations Charter". QNA (2026) ^[14].

Gulf analysts fear that the US lacks a clear 'exit strategy' and may declare victory and withdraw once its objectives are met, leaving its Gulf partners exposed to ongoing Iranian retaliation.



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Fig 5: Explains the main Future Scenarios that GCC Citizens Might Face

6. Deconstructions of the Complex Situation

6.1. Charting a Path Forward to Avoid GCC's Vulnerabilities

The GCC has historically struggled to translate rhetorical unity into effective collective defense mechanisms. The current crisis exposes the gap between individual national capabilities and the need for a coordinated regional response. The complexity of the crisis demands multi-faceted solutions that address security, diplomatic, economic, and domestic dimensions simultaneously. These solutions must be pursued in parallel, as progress in one area reinforces stability in others.

The GCC must immediately operationalize a truly integrated air defense system. This involves pooling interceptor

stockpiles, sharing real-time radar data, and coordinating response protocols. The theoretical concept of a unified Middle East air defense alliance must become an immediate, practical reality. This could include coordination with Jordan and, where strategically necessary, with Israel, though the latter remains politically sensitive.

While maintaining the US alliance, Gulf states should accelerate defense cooperation with other capable partners, including European powers and potentially Asian allies. This reduces over-dependence on any single patron and creates more leverage in security relationships.

The current crisis highlights the vulnerability of relying entirely on imported defense systems. Gulf states should accelerate investments in domestic defense manufacturing

capabilities, particularly for drone interception technology and cybersecurity, reducing long-term dependence on foreign suppliers. Young (2026)

Despite the current tensions, diplomatic channels with Iran must be preserved and, when possible, reactivated. Oman's foreign minister has correctly advocated for "inclusive dialogue" and "engagement, rather than containment" with Iran. The shared interests in Gulf stability and energy security provide a foundation for eventual talks, even if formal mediation is temporarily suspended.

Individual Gulf states are easier for both Iran and the US to dismiss or pressure. However, coordinated GCC diplomacy carries significantly more weight. The bloc should speak with one voice in international forums, at the UN Security Council, and in direct communications with both Washington and Tehran.

Gulf governments must demand clarity from Washington regarding its objectives and 'exit strategy'. This is not merely a request but a condition for continued cooperation. Gulf leaders should leverage their relationship with the US to shape the trajectory of the conflict rather than simply react to

it.

The GCC should actively support the resumption of US-Iran nuclear talks under international auspices. A negotiated framework for Iran's nuclear program, with robust verification mechanisms, remains the most sustainable path to preventing nuclear proliferation in the region.

Figure (6) visually deconstructs the challenges and opportunities facing GCC citizens and states. These drawings are designed to illustrate the complex geopolitical trap, the layered nature of the crisis, and the strategic pathways toward a more stable future.

Figure (6) The Geopolitical Vise - A Triangulation of Pressures

This figure illustrates the core dilemma for GCC states: being caught between an aggressive neighbour (Iran) and untrustworthy allies (US/Israel). It visualizes the "no-win scenario" where GCC sovereignty is squeezed from multiple directions.



Fig 1:

6.2. Re-Building the GCC Economic Resilience

The current crisis underscores the vulnerability of oil and gas-dependent economies. Gulf states must redouble efforts to diversify their economic bases, developing sectors less susceptible to disruption from regional conflict, such as finance, technology, and services that can operate remotely, Young (2026). Governments should develop comprehensive antifragile contingency plans for sustained conflict scenarios, including food security strategies, emergency energy reserves, and mechanisms to maintain essential services during extended disruptions. Buheji (2025)

In order to deconstruct the complexity of the GCC in this conflict, we need to deconstruct the problems that it is facing now or have the potential to occur. The author uses the classic "iceberg" model to distinguish between the visible, surface-level problems and the deeper, more dangerous underlying structural issues. A coordinated communications strategy is needed to reassure global markets and investors. This includes transparent reporting on defense capabilities, business continuity planning, and demonstrating the resilience of Gulf economies despite regional turbulence.

While full GCC citizens engagement may not be on the immediate horizon, expanding consultation mechanisms, strengthening advisory councils, and increasing transparency around national security decisions would build domestic resilience and legitimacy. Therefore, governments should implement programs that promote national unity and explicitly counter sectarian divisions. This includes public messaging that emphasizes shared citizenship over sectarian identity and ensures equitable treatment of all communities in the distribution of security and economic resources. Thus, rather than relying solely on censorship and warnings against sharing "rumors or unknown videos," governments should provide regular, credible updates on security situations and government responses. This builds public trust and reduces the space for misinformation to flourish.

Figure (7) The Layered Crisis - An Iceberg Diagram

This figure uses the classic "iceberg" model to distinguish between the visible, surface-level problems and the deeper, more dangerous underlying structural issues. This helps explain why the crisis is so difficult to solve—the visible part is just a fraction of the whole.

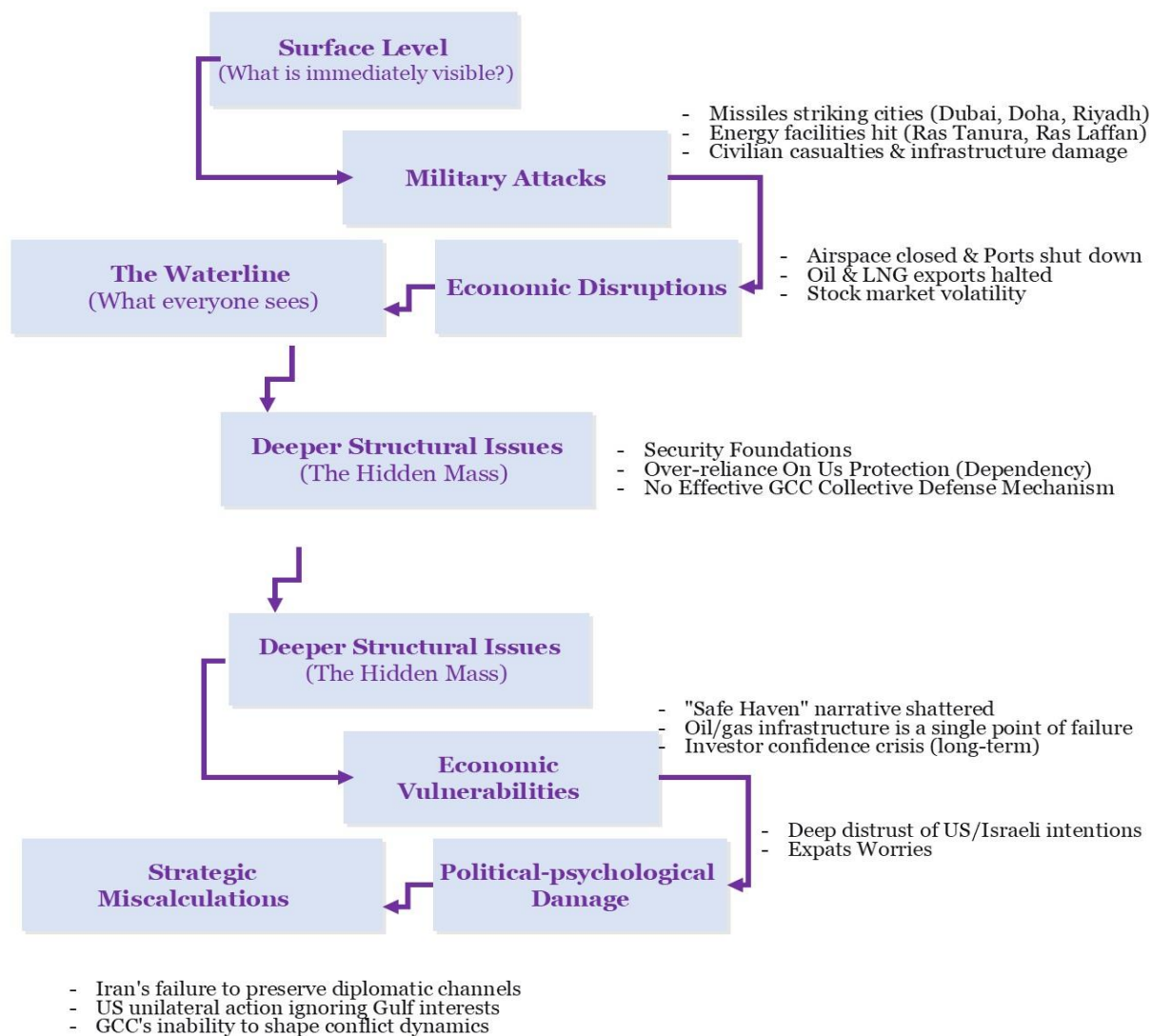


Fig 7: Illustrates the Total Iceberg Diagram

6.3. An Opportunity for a Turning Point

The current crisis represents both an unprecedented threat and a potential turning point for the GCC states. The old model of hedging, neutrality, and reliance on external protection has been fundamentally undermined. However, this moment of crisis also creates the conditions for necessary transformation.

By pursuing collective security, diversified partnerships, economic resilience, and domestic inclusivity, Gulf states can emerge from this conflict with greater autonomy, stronger regional coordination, and more robust domestic foundations. The path forward requires difficult choices and significant focused investments, but it is much better than the alternative scenario that the region remains trapped between Iran's

desperation and the US-Israel's strategic ambitions. The ultimate solution lies in the GCC states taking control of their own destiny, shaping the margins of escalation rather than simply absorbing its consequences, and building a regional order that serves their interests and protects their citizens. Hamzawy (2026) ^[8]

Figure (8) Pathways to Resilience - A Decision Tree / Strategic Choice Matrix

This figure moves from problem identification to solution visualization. It presents the strategic choices available to GCC states and maps the potential outcomes of different paths, contrasting a reactive "survival mode" with a proactive "resilience mode."

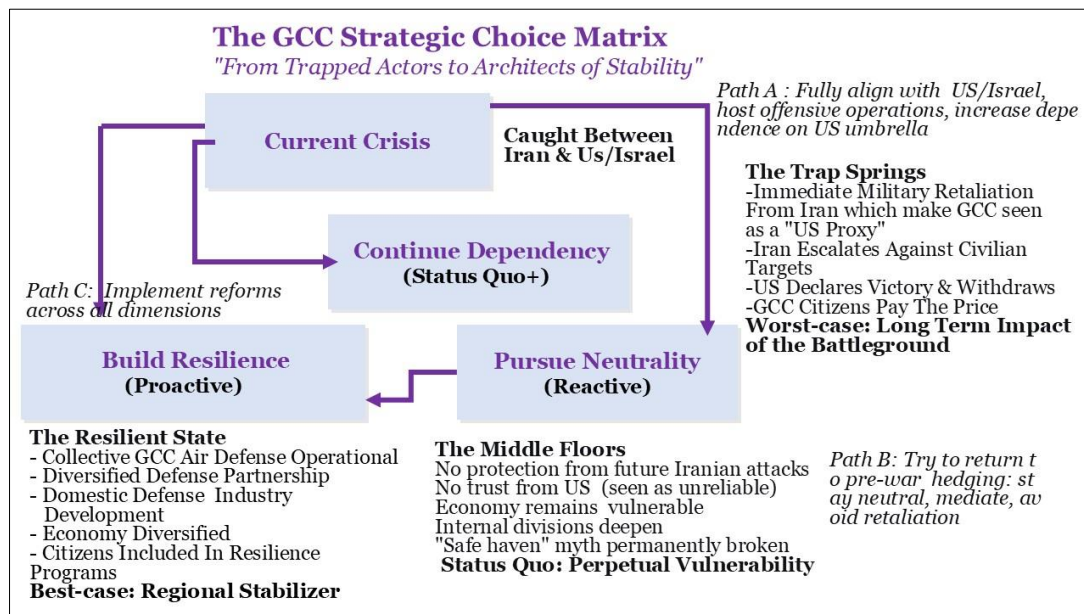


Fig 8: Shows the Strategic Choices for GCC Citizens during or after the Conflict

7. Scenarios for the Future: Alternative Trajectories

The trajectory of the crisis remains uncertain. Four plausible scenarios can be delineated, each with distinct implications for GCC citizens and states. Hamzawy (2026) ^[8]

Scenario 1: Short Conflict, Diplomatic Reset

Conditions: US and Iran agree to renewed nuclear negotiations; hostilities cease within weeks; GCC states return to a modified version of hedging and mediation.

Implications: Rapid economic recovery; reinforced but more skeptical dependence on US security umbrella; citizens experience crisis as a temporary shock rather than a permanent transformation. The "safe haven" brand recovers but with diminished credibility.

Likelihood: Moderate. The window for diplomatic reset narrows as casualties accumulate and positions harden.

Scenario 2: Prolonged Regional War

Conditions: Conflict continues for months or years; Iran and Israel exchange direct strikes; GCC states drawn deeper into confrontation; sustained attacks on Gulf infrastructure.

Implications: Severe economic contraction; mass expatriate departures; potential for internal instability in vulnerable states; citizens develop hardy coping mechanisms and deepened distrust of external powers. The "safe haven" narrative is permanently abandoned.

Likelihood: High. The structural dynamics of the conflict—unresolved nuclear concerns, deep-seated enmity between Iran and Israel, and the absence of effective diplomatic channels—suggest protracted confrontation.

Scenario 3: GCC-Iran Détente

Conditions: GCC states collectively negotiate a non-aggression pact with Iran, decoupling their security from US posture; Iran accepts the legitimacy of GCC sovereignty; US presence in the region diminishes.

Implications: Restoration of Gulf sovereignty; emergence of a genuinely independent regional order; citizens experience enhanced agency and pride. This scenario requires both unprecedented GCC unity and a fundamental shift in Iranian

strategic calculations.

Likelihood: Low. The trust deficits on all sides are profound. Iran's attacks on GCC territory have eliminated the residual goodwill that made quiet crisis management possible. However, shared interests in energy stability and regional order could eventually create conditions for engagement.

Scenario 4: US Withdrawal from the Region

Conditions: The United States, facing domestic pressures or strategic recalibration, reduces its military footprint in the Gulf; GCC states are forced into full self-reliance.

Implications: Short-term vulnerability and instability; accelerated defense industrialization; potentially accelerated détente with Iran if GCC states pursue independent diplomacy; citizens experience both heightened danger and enhanced agency.

Likelihood: Low in the short term, but plausible over a decade horizon. US strategic priorities are shifting toward great-power competition with China and Russia; the Gulf's centrality to US foreign policy may diminish accordingly.

7. Discussion

7.1. GCC Citizens Experiencing Uncertainty and Vulnerability

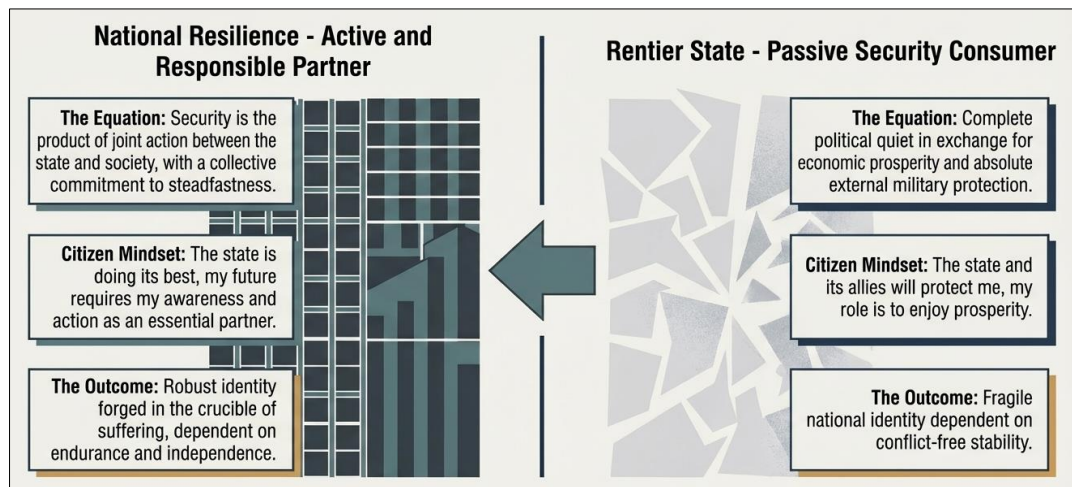
The conflict has fundamentally altered daily existence for GCC citizens and residents, transforming their lives from a narrative of stability and opportunity to one of uncertainty and vulnerability. The socioeconomic impact is not uniform—it varies dramatically based on nationality, wealth, and profession, but the psychological shift affects everyone who calls the Gulf home. The Conversation (2026)

For decades, Gulf citizens and the millions of expatriates who power their economies operated under a fundamental assumption: the Gulf was different. While the rest of the Middle East experienced conflict, revolution, and instability, the GCC states were oases of calm—places where families could build lives, careers could flourish, and the future felt predictable. That psychological foundation has been challenged since February 28, 2026, by both situations of uncertainty and vulnerability. Naha (2026) ^[12], The

Conversation (2026)

For many expatriates who live for a long time in the GCC, they experienced living like refugees, searching for safety where nowhere seems out of danger's reach. Some of these expats experienced seeing missiles hit hotels, apartments, and airports, Naha (2026) ^[12]. For GCC citizens—who have

known only stability and prosperity for generations—this represents an existential shock. The carefully cultivated national brands built on tourism, investment, and global talent attraction now compete with images of missile interceptions lighting up the skylines of Kuwait, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Manama.



Generated by the author using NotebookLM

Fig 9: Radical Transformation Required in GCC Social Contract

7.2. Living Immediate Socioeconomic Disruptions

The war's first days have already produced tangible disruptions to daily life and economic activity. Work and Education have been well disrupted. Schools across Qatar, Kuwait, and other GCC states have shifted to online classes. Many businesses have implemented work-from-home protocols. Public events, including Ramadan night prayers (Tharaweeh), have been suspended in multiple countries or are being done with limited time.

Residents report sleeping poorly, with families huddled together in fear as explosions tear through the night sky. Constant alerts and sirens have become part of the daily routine. Panic buying and supply concerns have emerged in some areas. Markets remain open but "subdued".

The migrant workers who constitute the majority of the population in several Gulf states face a fundamentally different reality. They lack the citizenship protections, family networks, and long-term stakes that nationals possess. As one Bahrain-based researcher observed, in the chaos of the attacks, "their experiences mirrored those of displaced communities in conflict zones".

The challenge is that many low-income migrants often live in densely populated labour accommodations near industrial areas that could become targets. Most expatriates do not have extended family with them, limiting their ability to make independent decisions during emergencies. Doctors, nurses, and frontline workers—disproportionately migrants—must report to duty even as their own families face danger. If instability continues, patterns from the COVID-19 pandemic may repeat, with mass departures and economic disruption. Beyond the immediate physical danger, the conflict creates multiple economic pressures that affect household finances and socioeconomic stability. The shift to remote work and school closures disrupts productivity and job security. For hourly workers and those in sectors vulnerable to economic contraction, the threat of income loss is real.

Gulf states now face massive increases in defense expenditures—intercepting Iranian projectiles costs exponentially more than it does for Iran to produce and launch them. This creates a fiscal dilemma: money spent on air defense is money not spent on social services, infrastructure, or the diversification projects central to national "Visions." Some Gulf states might already be facing budget constraints due to downturns in hydrocarbon, shipping, tourism, and aviation revenues, coupled with surging defense costs.

7.3. Investment, Savings, and Energy Infrastructure at Risk

Gulf states hold massive overseas investment portfolios. If these must be liquidated or if returns diminish due to economic pressures, the sovereign wealth funds that underwrite citizen benefits and national budgets could be affected. Officials report that Gulf countries "have begun an internal review to determine whether force majeure clauses can be invoked in current contracts" and are reviewing "current and future investment commitments".

For citizens whose national budgets depend on hydrocarbon revenues, attacks on energy infrastructure represent a direct threat to their economic future. QatarEnergy has declared force majeure due to disruptions in gas and oil exports, with its minister warning: "If this war continues for a few weeks, GDP growth around the world will be impacted". Saudi Arabia's largest oil refinery was put out of commission. These are not abstract national statistics—they translate directly into budget pressures, potential cuts to subsidies, and economic uncertainty for ordinary households. Magdy (2026) ^[11]

7.4. Long-Term Socioeconomic Trajectories at Risk

Before the current crisis, the GCC's socioeconomic outlook was remarkably positive. The IMF (2026) ^[9] noted that "nonhydrocarbon activity has been strong amid reform

implementation" and that "the growth outlook is positive". Oxford Economics (2026)^[13] projected consumption would increase 3.4% annually across the GCC over five years—double the rate of advanced economies—with low unemployment and steady inflation.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have bet heavily on becoming hubs for global talent, data centers, tourism, and logistics. As the Carnegie analysis warns, "attracting tourists, building and operating data centers, and sustaining complex logistical hubs is difficult in the middle of an active war zone". If global firms decide that Riyadh or Dubai no longer qualify as stable locations for regional headquarters or critical infrastructure, the entire post-oil diversification strategy is at risk.

Even successful defense—intercepting most missiles—may not be "good enough when it comes to global firms deciding where to invest and expand". Risk premiums will rise. Insurance costs for businesses and properties in the Gulf will increase. The "Gulf premium" of stability that attracted capital may become a "Gulf discount" of conflict risk.

7.5. The Reputational Damage That Lasts

Perhaps most insidious is the intangible but critical damage to the Gulf's brand. As one analyst noted, the deeper threat is not physical but "reputational—their brand as stable, predictable havens for investment and tourism". Once that perception shifts, it takes years and enormous resources to rebuild. For citizens whose livelihoods, savings, and future opportunities are tied to that brand, the stakes could not be higher.

This reputational erosion operates on multiple interconnected levels. For global investors and multinational corporations, the calculus of where to locate regional headquarters, data centers, and critical infrastructure has fundamentally shifted. The Gulf was once selected for its predictability—a region where business could proceed uninterrupted by the conflicts that plagued neighboring areas. Now, images of missile interceptions lighting up the skylines of the GCC main Cities circulate globally within minutes, embedding a new association: the Gulf is no longer apart from the region's conflicts but at the center of them.

Based on the rapidly developing situation in the region, the insurance premiums for properties and businesses will rise; risk assessments will be recalibrated; and the "Gulf premium" of stability that justified higher valuations and investment flows may invert into a "Gulf discount" reflecting heightened geopolitical risk. For citizens employed in the very sectors most dependent on this reputation—finance, tourism,

aviation, logistics—the threat is not abstract but deeply personal.

Beyond the economic calculus lies a more profound loss: the erosion of a carefully cultivated national narrative that took decades to construct. The "safe haven" identity was not merely a marketing slogan but a source of collective pride and a foundational element of national purpose. For Emiratis, the transformation of Dubai into a global hub was proof that their nation could transcend its desert origins and claim a place among the world's most sophisticated economies. For Qataris, hosting the World Cup and becoming the world's largest LNG exporter represented validation of their ambitious vision. For Saudis, Vision 2030 was a promise of a future beyond oil, one where their country would be open, dynamic, and globally integrated. The war threatens to unravel these narratives not through physical destruction alone but through the slow, corrosive realization that the stability upon which these visions were built was never as secure as assumed. Rebuilding that trust—both externally with global markets and internally within citizens who must believe in their country's future—will demand not only military and economic resilience but a fundamental reimagining of what the Gulf stands for in a fundamentally altered regional order.

7.6. The Psychological Toll: Living in a New Reality

Beyond measurable economic impacts, the conflict imposes psychological costs that will shape Gulf society for years. For example, parents describe the terror of trying to reach children during attacks, the helplessness of watching families huddle in fear. Children experience trauma that will shape their worldview. One Kuwaiti grandfather described his granddaughters' contrasting reactions—one panicked, the other treating explosions "almost like a festival"—highlighting the confusion and unpredictability of life under fire. The Conversation (2026)

Many expatriates chose the Gulf specifically for safety and opportunity. A journalist captured the cognitive dissonance: "Until now, we have only read about or watched conflicts from afar. Now, the reality of war is hitting home: it is literally at our doorstep".

Gulf nationals who never imagined their countries as battlegrounds now face profound questions: Will my children have the same opportunities I had? Can our government protect us from further situation deterioration, if the US-Israeli War on Iran continues? Table (3) tries to answer the unanswered stakes and what might erode the social contract that has underpinned Gulf stability.

Table 3: The Spillover of the New Socioeconomic Reality by Group Type

Group	Immediate Impact	Socioeconomic Stakes	Future Uncertainty
GCC Citizens	Disrupted daily life, psychological trauma, questions about leadership	National budgets, sovereign wealth, social benefits, employment in diversified economy	Will the "Vision" economies survive? Can sovereignty be restored?
High-Income Expatriates	Business disruption, remote work, travel difficulties	Career investments, property values, quality of life calculations	Is the Gulf still worth it? Should we relocate?
Migrant Workers	Physical vulnerability, housing insecurity, potential job loss	Remittance-dependent families back home, savings, legal status	Will we be forced to leave? Can we survive economically?
Business Owners/Investors	Supply chain disruption, revenue declines, insurance costs	Long-term investments, contracts, market access	Should we invoke force majeure? Divest? Wait it out?

7.7. The Path Forward: From Crisis to New Reality

The coming months will determine whether this crisis represents a temporary disruption or a permanent transformation of Gulf socioeconomic life. Several factors will shape outcomes. A short, contained conflict may allow rapid recovery. A prolonged war could permanently alter the region's trajectory. If critical infrastructure—power grids, water desalination, energy facilities—suffers significant damage, the consequences would be catastrophic. As one expert warned, "Without air conditioning and water desalination, the scorching hot and bone-dry Gulf countries are essentially uninhabitable".

Depending on how GCC governments manage the crisis, their transparency, effectiveness in protecting citizens, and ability to maintain economic stability will shape public trust for generations. If the Gulf states can coordinate defense, pool resources, and present a unified front, they may emerge stronger. As analysts argue, "only collective action among the GCC states is likely to get them out of this dilemma".

For the millions who call the Gulf home—citizens and expatriates alike—the fundamental question is whether the region can restore the sense of safety and predictability that made it unique. The answer will determine not just their socioeconomic status, but the very fabric of their lives.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

8.1. Forging Hardiness from Vulnerability

The concept of hardiness, often used in psychology, refers to the ability to endure difficult conditions and emerge stronger, more committed, and more in control. It is built on the "3 Cs": Commitment (vs. Alienation), Control (vs. Powerlessness), and Challenge (vs. Threat). For GCC citizens, the War on Iran, while devastating, is an undeniable moment of truth, and a nation-defining challenge. How it shapes their hardiness will depend on how the crisis is navigated by both the GCC states and their societies.

One of the most psychologically devastating aspects of the crisis is the feeling of being trapped between two larger, more powerful forces—a pawn in someone else's game. Hardiness is built by replacing that feeling of helplessness with a sense of collective efficacy: the belief that "we" can influence our own destiny.

The experience of vulnerability is the raw material for hardiness. It is the fire. The "shaping" happens as citizens and their leaders respond to that fire. The war moves GCC citizens from a state of passive security consumers to potential active participants in their own survival and future. For decades, the social contract in the Gulf was simple: citizens traded with political stability for unparalleled security and economic benefits. The state, backed by Western powers, provided protection. The current crisis has fundamentally broken that contract. The US umbrella has proven unreliable, and national defenses, while sophisticated, have not prevented their cities from being hit.

This loss of external control forces an internal reclamation. The old mindset for the GCC citizen is that "my government and its powerful allies will protect me. My job is to enjoy the prosperity." After this War on Iran by US-Israeli and Iran fireback on GCC, the new reality might be "my government is trying its best, but I cannot be a passive bystander. My safety, my family's safety, and my country's future require my awareness and my actions."

This shift from passive recipient to active stakeholder is the

bedrock of hardiness. It manifests in tangible ways. First, the immediate aftermath of attacks has seen neighbours checking on neighbours, communities organizing to help affected families (especially vulnerable migrant workers), and a surge in local volunteering. This builds the Commitment (C1) pillar of hardiness—a deeper connection to fellow citizens and a sense of shared fate. It transforms the nation from an abstract concept into a tangible network of mutual reliance.

Citizens can no longer rely solely on state media or international outlets. They are forced to become critical consumers of information, discerning between propaganda, misinformation, and credible news. This builds a form of intellectual control in an otherwise uncontrollable situation, contributing to the Control (C2) pillar.

A hardy citizenry, having taken on more responsibility, will naturally demand more say. This could manifest as a more engaged public discourse on national security decisions, defense spending, and the country's strategic direction. They move from being subjects to being citizens with a stake in the choices that affect their lives. This is the ultimate expression of reclaiming Control.

Thw analysis in this paper has noted that the only way out of this dilemma is through unified GCC action. This necessity is a powerful driver of hardiness. Individual Gulf states are vulnerable, but a coordinated bloc has real leverage. Citizens who see their leaders coordinating defense, pooling resources, and speaking with one voice will feel a surge of collective power. The shared experience of being targeted by Iran and distrusted by the West can forge a stronger pan-Gulf identity. A Kuwaiti, a Bahraini, and an Emirati now share a common experience of vulnerability and a common interest in resilience. This transcends individual nationalisms and builds a regional "we" that is better equipped to navigate the crisis.

As dependence on the US becomes more politically and emotionally fraught, there will be a greater push for, and pride in, indigenous defense and diplomatic solutions. This could mean accelerated development of domestic defense industries, more assertive GCC-led diplomacy, and the creation of homegrown frameworks for regional security. Success in these areas would be a massive boost to the Control (C2) pillar of hardiness.

8.2. Redefining National Identity: The "Challenge" Mindset

Before the war, national identity in the Gulf was often tied to economic success, futuristic skylines, and global prestige—the "Safe Haven" narrative. This identity, while powerful, was fragile because it was built on external validation and the absence of conflict.

The war shatters that fragile identity, creating a void that must be filled. This is the "Challenge" (C3) component of hardiness: viewing the stressor not as a paralyzing threat, but as an opportunity for growth and self-definition as mentioned in section 8.1.

A new layer is added to national identity. The citizen is no longer just a beneficiary of the state's wealth but a defender of its sovereignty. This can be seen in the quiet pride surrounding national air defense teams or the resilience shown by civilians during attacks. The national story shifts from "look at our buildings" to "look at our people's strength."

An authentic identity forged in adversity is often more robust

and authentic than one built on prosperity alone. It is based on shared experience, collective endurance, and demonstrated values. The experience of huddling with family during a missile strike, of supporting a neighbor, of continuing to go to work despite the fear—these become the new, powerful stories that bind the nation together. It builds a deep, unshakeable Commitment to the nation, not as a provider, but as a community.

The crisis clarifies the nation's position in the world. The deep distrust of both Iran (the immediate attacker) and the US/Israel (the unreliable ally) forces a more independent and self-reliant national consciousness. Citizens begin to articulate a distinct national interest that is not subordinate to either Tehran or Washington. This clarity of purpose is a key component of collective hardiness.

8.3. Implications for Policymaking and Stakeholders

The strategy scenarios underscore the importance of hedging strategies that prepare for multiple futures. GCC governments should simultaneously pursue diplomatic engagement with Iran (to enable Scenarios 1 and 3), accelerate defense industrialization (to prepare for Scenarios 2 and 4), and invest in social and economic resilience (to buffer against the worst impacts of Scenario 2). For citizens, awareness of these possible futures can transform passive anxiety into active preparedness—a key component of psychological hardiness.

The complexity of the crisis demands coordinated action across multiple stakeholders. The following recommendations are organized by the actor best positioned to implement them.

8.3.1. For GCC Governments

1. Establish a Permanent Joint Defense Council: Move beyond existing mechanisms to create a standing body with operational authority over integrated air defense, intelligence sharing, and rapid response coordination. This body should be empowered to make decisions without requiring unanimous approval in emergency situations.
2. Develop Transparent Emergency Communication Protocols: Counter misinformation and build public trust by establishing clear, regular channels for security updates. Designate official spokespersons, schedule regular briefings, and utilize multiple platforms (social media, television, mobile alerts) to reach all population segments.
3. Create Social Safety Nets for All Residents: Extend emergency support mechanisms to include migrant workers, who constitute the majority of the population in several GCC states and are most vulnerable to economic disruption. This includes rent moratoriums, food assistance, and healthcare access regardless of legal status.
4. Mandate Business Continuity Planning: Require critical infrastructure operators, financial institutions, and major employers to maintain and regularly test continuity plans. This builds systemic resilience and reduces the economic impact of disruptions.

5. Accelerate Defense Industrialization: Reduce long-term dependence on foreign suppliers by investing in domestic manufacturing capabilities, particularly for drone interception, cybersecurity, and intelligence analysis.

8.3.2. For the GCC Secretariat

1. Develop Standardized Crisis Response Frameworks: Create model protocols for civil defense, emergency services, and public communication that member states can adapt to their national contexts.
2. Establish a Regional Emergency Fund: Pool resources to provide rapid financial assistance to member states facing acute economic pressure from conflict-related disruptions.
3. Coordinate Diplomatic Positioning: Ensure the GCC speaks with a unified voice in international forums, at the UN Security Council, and in direct communications with Washington, Tehran, and other capitals.

8.3.3. For Civil Society and Community Organizations

1. Support Mutual Aid Networks: The spontaneous neighbor-to-neighbor assistance that emerged during initial attacks should be formalized and supported, creating community-level resilience infrastructure.
2. Develop Psychological First Aid Training: Equip schools, workplaces, and community centers to provide basic psychological support. Trauma-informed responses in the immediate aftermath of attacks can prevent long-term psychological harm.
3. Promote Cross-Community Solidarity: Intentionally create spaces and programs that bring together citizens and residents across national, sectarian, and socioeconomic lines. Social cohesion is a critical buffer against the fractures that conflict can produce.

8.3.4. For Citizens and Residents

1. Develop Individual Preparedness: While governments bear primary responsibility for security, individual preparedness—emergency kits, family communication plans, awareness of shelter locations—enhances personal safety and reduces panic.
2. Engage Critically with Information: The information environment during conflict is saturated with misinformation. Citizens should cultivate critical media literacy, verifying information through multiple sources before acting or sharing.
3. Participate in Community Resilience: Hardiness is built collectively. Neighbor networks, volunteer groups, and community organizations amplify individual resilience into community strength.

8.4. The Emergence of the "New Gulf Citizen"

The War on Iran is forcing the Gulf citizen to grow up. The era of insulated, state-provided security is over. In its place is a harsher, more uncertain world. But within that harshness lies the seed of something powerful: a citizen who is more engaged, more resilient, and more committed to their nation than ever before.

This "New Gulf Citizen" would be characterized by the following four characteristics:

Character (1) Agency over Entitlement - example: they understand that their security is a co-production between state and society.

Character (2) Skepticism over Naivety – example: they view the promises of foreign powers with a clear-eyed pragmatism.

Character (3) Unity over Division - example: they see their fellow citizens and residents as partners in a shared project of national survival.

Character (4) Pride in Resilience - their national pride is rooted not in glass and steel, but in the demonstrated strength and character of their people.

The crucible of war is a terrible teacher, but its lessons are profound. Whether the GCC citizen emerges from this fire hardened or shattered will be the defining story of the region for the next generation.

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How to Cite This Article

Buheji M. Deconstructing the Complexity of the situation for GCC citizens during the US-Israeli War on Iran. *Int J Soc Sci Except Res.* 2026;5(2):183–198. doi:10.54660/IJSSER.2026.5.2.183-198.

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