

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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## Trump's Second-Term Middle East Strategy and the Reconfiguration of Regional Security

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### **Trump's Second-Term Vision for the Middle East: Dual Track of Gulf Alignment and Military Pressure on Iran**

In May 2025, President Donald Trump chose Saudi Arabia as the destination for his first overseas trip of his second term, extending the visit to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The tour yielded landmark agreements in investment and arms sales—\$600 billion from Saudi Arabia, \$1.2 trillion from Qatar, and \$1.4 trillion from the UAE—amounting to an unprecedented series of economic, AI, and security “mega-package deals.” Trump pledged to advance an executive order streamlining procedures for Gulf capital investment in the United States, while the Department of Commerce announced it would ease export restrictions on advanced semiconductors and weapons—measures originally enacted under the Joe Biden administration—in order to counter China’s growing influence in the Gulf.

Yet despite emphasizing “America First” economics and calling for an end to wars, the Trump administration in June made the unprecedented decision to directly strike Iranian nuclear facilities in response to the outbreak of the Israel–Iran war. What ultimately compelled the president—who had long pledged to avoid military entanglements in the Middle East—was Israel’s successful preemptive strike. By degrading much of Iran’s air defenses, intelligence, and command systems in advance, Israel significantly reduced the military burden on Washington when it launched direct attacks on Iran. At the same time, U.S. calculations reflected a strategic aim to curb Iran’s military adventurism, the Shiite power that had long threatened Sunni Gulf states. The strikes are widely assessed to have delayed Iran’s nuclear-weapons program by up to two years. Immediately afterward, Trump hinted at the possibility of regime change to maximize pressure on Tehran’s hardline elite.

Just two days later, he again shocked the world by announcing a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Iran.

### **The Gulf States' Balance Sheet with the United States: Reform Success, Security Guarantees, and Enhanced Regional Status**

Having long sought to maximize leverage in the context of U.S.–China competition—advancing reform agendas, securing defense guarantees, and elevating their regional standing—the Gulf states are now poised to deepen cooperation with Washington, their indispensable security provider.

The inauguration of Trump's second term eased political constraints on the Gulf monarchies by reinforcing a transactional approach, while the Trump family's longstanding personal ties with Gulf royal houses further facilitated economic linkages. During the tour, the Gulf states agreed to stringent security measures demanded by Washington to prevent technology leakage to China, and the United States and the UAE finalized a Technology Framework Agreement. Saudi Arabia, despite its reliance on relatively high oil prices to sustain the Vision 2030 reform project, demonstrated flexibility by drawing on spare capacity to meet Trump's immediate request for increased supply. This move reflected not only economic considerations but also a deliberate political choice to strengthen strategic cooperation with Washington and secure reliable security guarantees. Trump, for his part, placed particular emphasis on his visit to Saudi Arabia, the centerpiece of his Gulf itinerary. At the urgent request of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, he met with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Subsequently, he announced the lifting of sanctions on Syria, significantly boosting Riyadh's regional stature. In September, the commander of U.S. Central Command reinforced this shift with an official visit to Syria for talks with al-Sharaa.

### **Iran's Strategic Limits: Collapse of the “Axis of Resistance,” Elite Panic and Fragmentation, and Popular Defection**

In contrast to its rivals, Iran has exposed the fragility of its regime under U.S.–Israeli offensives, marked by elite infighting over a post-Khamenei order, widespread public discontent, and the erosion of Shia leadership authority. During the June Israel–Iran war, many of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's closest aides were eliminated, while Khamenei himself disappeared from public view for three weeks.

Having pledged retaliation, Tehran felt compelled to stage a symbolic response to U.S. strikes on its nuclear facilities, yet sought to contain escalation. After notifying the Qatari government in advance, Iran launched medium-range ballistic missiles and drones at the U.S. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, deliberately avoiding serious damage. This, however, backfired: unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar had long preserved cordial ties with Iran and functioned as a vital mediation channel with Washington. Doha therefore reacted sharply, condemning the strike as a violation of sovereignty. Although Tehran emphasized its

unwillingness to escalate and promised to halt further action once Israeli attacks subsided, the incident strained its diplomatic relationship with Qatar—once a valuable asset.

Meanwhile, with its proxy network—the so-called “Axis of Resistance”—crippled, Tehran has pivoted toward an anti-U.S. alignment with China, Russia, and North Korea, labeled by some as the “Axis of Aggressors.” Yet the September snapback of UN sanctions over nuclear violations will only tighten Iran’s strategic constraints. The Islamic Republic now faces what may be its most severe crisis since its founding in 1979.

### **Prospects for Trump’s Second-Term New Middle East Strategy and the Israeli Variable**

This dual approach—deepening Gulf alignment while escalating military pressure on Iran—defined Trump’s second term, significantly weakening Tehran and the broader Shia bloc while elevating a new Middle East order led by Israel and the Gulf monarchies. At the same time, the Israel–Iran war exposed the limits of China’s regional influence, in sharp contrast to Washington’s projection of overwhelming hard power.

Yet Israel’s unrestrained military drive and its plans to reoccupy Gaza risk unsettling the emerging order forged amid Iran’s decline. In September, Israeli airstrikes on Qatar, coupled with overwhelming UN support—spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and France—for Palestinian statehood, underscored the obstacles facing Trump’s Middle East strategy. Conscious of public opinion, Gulf states are likely to proceed cautiously in joining the new order, while Saudi Arabia—Trump’s closest Gulf partner—may even press Washington to rein in Israel.

Trump wields greater leverage over Prime Minister Netanyahu than any previous U.S. leader, and if he were to demand an unequivocal end to the war, a new regional security framework could begin to take shape. He also seeks urgent diplomatic achievements: ending the conflict, expanding the Abraham Accords, and mobilizing Gulf financial support for Gaza’s reconstruction. In practice, accords signatories such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco have quietly preserved their ties with Israel, while other neighbors benefit from the regional stability produced by Iran’s weakening and the erosion of the Axis of Resistance. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, meanwhile, are already cooperating with Israel within U.S. Central Command’s integrated defense framework.

Still, with international criticism of Israel’s military conduct mounting, only a U.S.-led ceasefire and diplomatic pathway can revitalize détente between Sunni Arab states and Israel. Accordingly, Trump is likely to intensify pressure on Netanyahu as he stakes his broader New Middle East strategy on the outcome. Despite the constraints of Israeli domestic politics, the Trump administration’s second term is expected to push actively for the consolidation of this reshaped order. Through this process, a new regional security framework—anchored by the Gulf states and Israel—appears likely to take root, reinforced by Iran’s strategic decline.

## About the Author

**Dr. JANG Ji-Hyang** is a Principal Fellow and director of the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Jang served as a policy advisor on Middle East issues to South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012-2018) and currently serves to Ministries of Industry, Justice, and Defense. Her research interests include political economy of the Middle East and North Africa, political Islam, comparative democratization, terrorism, and state-building. Dr. Jang is the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Essential Guide to the Middle East* (Sigongsa 2023 in Korean), *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transitions?* (with Clement M. Henry (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan 2013), "Disaggregated ISIS and the New Normal of Terrorism" (Asan Issue Brief 2016), "Islamic Fundamentalism" (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008) and a Korean translation of Fawaz Gerges' *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Asan Institute 2011). Dr. Jang received a B.A. in Turkish studies and M.A. in political science from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Texas at Austin.

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