

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

No. 2026-15(S)

## The 2026 U.S.-Iran War and the Transformation of the Gulf Security Architecture: From Crisis to Collective Security

**Jang Ji-Hyang**

Principal Fellow

**Lee Taehee**

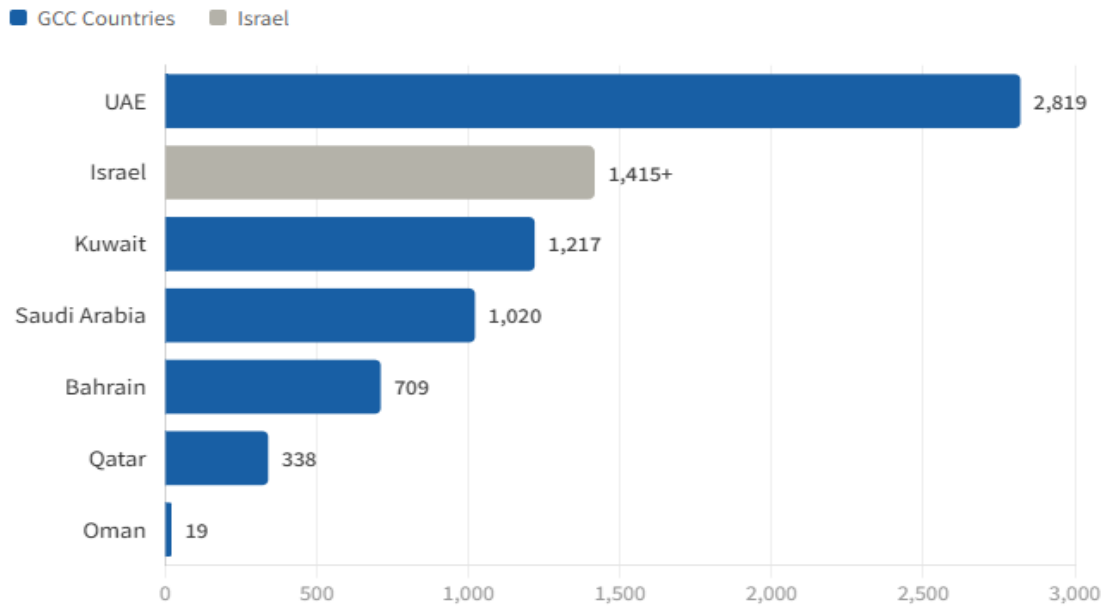
Research Associate

2026-06-15

### **Iran's Unprecedented Offensive against the Gulf States and the Crisis in Gulf Security**

When the United States and Israel launched preemptive strikes against Iran on February 28, 2026, Iran retaliated by targeting U.S. military bases across the Gulf — Al Udeid in Qatar, Ali Al Salem in Kuwait, Al Dhafra in the UAE, and the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. Beginning in early March, the attacks expanded to non-military critical infrastructure across all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, including oil facilities, gas fields, ports, storage sites, airports, logistics hubs, and residential areas. Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura complex, the UAE's Fujairah port, and Dubai International Airport were all struck.

**[Figure 1] Iran-Launched Missile and Drone Attacks against GCC Member States (Feb. 28 – Apr. 10, 2026)**



Iran made no exceptions for states that had served as mediators or economic partners: Oman, which had facilitated U.S.–Iran nuclear negotiations, and Qatar, which had maintained economic channels during sanctions, were both targeted. Iran also struck Qatar’s Ras Laffan complex, one of the world’s largest LNG export hubs, inflicting extensive damage on global LNG supply chains. The UAE absorbed approximately 2,800 attacks—double the roughly 1,400 recorded against Israel over the same period.

Iran simultaneously blockaded the Strait of Hormuz. Despite international condemnation, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) laid mines across the strait and threatened to seize or sink transiting vessels. With roughly 20–30 percent of global seaborne oil passing through Hormuz, Gulf energy exports were effectively paralyzed. Global oil supply fell by at least 14 million barrels per day, and crude prices surged from around \$70 before the war to \$126 per barrel by late April. The IRGC further expanded the blockade to vessels affiliated with the United States, Israel, and their partners, demanding passage fees of up to \$2 million per ship payable in Chinese yuan, severely shaking the maritime security order founded on the principle of freedom of navigation.

## **The IRGC's Asymmetric Warfare and the Rise of a Gulf Collective Security Framework**

The United States deployed its largest Middle East force since 2003 and, alongside Israel, neutralized approximately 17,000 Iranian security assets in one of the most concentrated opening air offensives in modern warfare. As military pressure mounted, Iran's leadership fractured between hardliners and moderates, with internal coordination visibly breaking down. The IRGC's senior command was decapitated in a series of targeted strikes, leaving its chain of command in disarray. Hardliners resorted to dispersed, unit-level attacks using low-cost drones—fragmented asymmetric warfare rather than coordinated operations. The IRGC also deployed asymmetric naval tactics in the Strait of Hormuz: demanding tolls from transiting vessels and subjecting those that refused to drone strikes, gunfire, and seizure threats. In the so-called “mosquito fleet” tactic, dozens of small fast-attack craft surrounded and harassed vessels with coordinated missile, machine-gun, and kamikaze drone attacks from multiple directions.

Despite Iran's firing of thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles and drones in simultaneous salvos to saturate Gulf air defenses, integrated networks centered on U.S.-supplied Patriot and THAAD systems achieved interception rates exceeding 90 percent. The UAE intercepted 94 percent of drones and 92 percent of ballistic and cruise missiles. Iran's attempt to blockade the Strait of Hormuz backfired when the United States launched a counter-blockade: precision strikes on Iranian vessels and oil transport infrastructure caused Iran's crude exports to China to collapse. At the same time, food and other essential imports were cut off, deepening the economic crisis. Iran's oil storage facilities neared saturation, while shuttered wells risked permanent production losses due to reservoir pressure decline and equipment corrosion—a particular vulnerability given Iran's aging oil fields.

The war also exposed structural limits in Gulf air defense. Within roughly one month, Gulf states collectively expended approximately 2,400 interceptor missiles—over 85 percent of their pre-war stockpiles—against cheap Iranian drones, confronting a severe cost-asymmetry problem. Gaps in real-time cross-border early warning and intercept coordination created defensive blind spots. Expanding mid-tier interceptor inventories, building missile stockpiles, and constructing a regionally integrated air defense network linking early-warning, command-and-control, and intercept systems emerged as urgent tasks. A virtual emergency GCC ministerial meeting on March 1 reaffirmed that an attack on any member constitutes an attack on all. On March 13, former Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim proposed a “Gulf NATO” with the six GCC states as the core and Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt as extended partners; coupled with a broader concept of a multilayered security structure integrating the United States and Israel into a unified air defense network, this brought discussions

of a “Middle East NATO” to the fore. Israel had been transferred to CENTCOM’s area of responsibility in 2021, and in January 2026, the Pentagon activated the MEAD-CDOC cell at Al Udeid to link United States, Israeli, and GCC air defense assets. Bahrain and its GCC partners submitted a UN Security Council resolution on the protection of shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, backed by the United States. However, China and Russia vetoed it, claiming that it was biased against Iran.

### **Consolidation of a U.S.-Centered Gulf Security System: The UAE Taking a Swift Lead, Bahrain as Strategic Bridgehead, and Saudi Arabia’s Gradual Convergence**

Virtually no country currently possesses the capacity to replicate the air defense coverage the United States provides, and any GCC collective security framework will necessarily remain tightly integrated with American capabilities. The sense of vulnerability generated by Iran’s attacks far outweighed Gulf frustrations over Washington’s decision to initiate the war. In particular, by striking the entire Gulf region—including states that had maintained cordial ties with Tehran—Iran rendered ineffective the strategies Gulf states had pursued to buffer security threats through engagement.

In March, the UAE reportedly participated in several covert strikes on Iranian strategic energy assets, including the Lavan Island refinery, in coordination with the United States and Israel, while Saudi Arabia is also reported to have conducted limited strikes. From April, the UAE and Bahrain actively joined U.S.-led efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Qatar’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated in March that “the security partnership with the United States is the central instrument deterring attacks against Qatar,” while UAE Presidential Adviser Anwar Gargash stated in April that “this war has reinforced the importance of the American role in Gulf security.”

Having absorbed approximately 2,800 Iranian missile and drone strikes, the UAE has been the most vocal in calling for robust GCC collective action. At the UAE’s request, Israel in April deployed Iron Dome—its core air defense system—and operating personnel outside Israeli territory for the first time, marking its first operational deployment to a country other than its co-developer, the United States. Iron Dome intercepted dozens of Iranian missiles in the UAE airspace. Israel simultaneously deployed Iron Beam, its laser-based air defense system still in its early operational stage, marking its first overseas combat use.

UAE–Israel cooperation has been elevated to a de facto alliance-level security partnership against Iran, combining integrated air defense and intelligence sharing. Senior UAE officials stated that the war “reconfirmed that the United States and Israel are the UAE’s true allies.” Since the Abraham Accords normalized relations in 2020, cooperation has expanded rapidly into the security sphere. Even after the October 2023 Hamas–Israel war, the UAE maintained

its embassy in Tel Aviv and did not recall its ambassador. The Israel–UAE CEPA, in force since April 2023, remained operative, with bilateral trade reaching approximately \$3.2 billion in 2024, up roughly 11 percent year-on-year. In May 2026, Gargash stated: “The UAE’s signing of the Abraham Accords was a sovereign and strategic choice, and having a neighbor like Iran makes our relationship with Israel stronger.”

Saudi Arabia, as the Sunni world’s leading power, has felt deeply threatened by Iran’s attacks and the Hormuz blockade, but continues to exercise caution regarding open cooperation with Israel, given the political weight of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the risk of immediate IRGC retaliation against its infrastructure. With the UAE deepening ties with the United States and Israel and announcing its withdrawal from OPEC, it is politically difficult for Saudi Arabia to be seen following the UAE’s lead. Saudi Arabia is therefore strengthening its own defense capabilities and deepening ties with Turkey and Pakistan to expand its strategic options.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia will likely make the pragmatic long-term choice to join a U.S.-centered, technology-based security architecture. Saudi Arabia designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization in 2018. This war reconfirmed the overwhelming advantage of U.S. surveillance and reconnaissance assets as well as integrated command systems. The more deeply Gulf states integrate U.S. weaponry, the more their command, control, and communications systems and operational doctrine become embedded in U.S. standards, making any transition to alternatives progressively more costly. South Korea’s *Cheongung-II*, which recorded high intercept performance in the UAE, was also able to operate successfully because it was compatible with the U.S.-standard air defense architecture.

Gulf security will ultimately evolve beyond individual national defense toward an integrated security architecture that maximizes U.S.-centered interconnectivity. The United States will actively encourage this model—combining Israeli technological capability, Gulf capital, and American command-and-control and intelligence power—as a means of progressively distributing the strategic burden of maintaining regional security.

**This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2026-16).**

(‘2026 미-이란 전쟁과 걸프 안보 체계의 전환 가능성: 위기에서 집단안보로’)