



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Managed Tensions: A Diplomatic Tool

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Conventional wisdom suggests that states constantly seek to maintain stability in their region to protect their national interests. This stability is necessary to prevent the spillover of tensions and conflicts across borders, as any turmoil in the surrounding region can directly affect a country's internal security. In addition, instability can undermine economic development by creating an unattractive environment for foreign investment and consuming resources, thereby hampering the ability of countries to achieve sustainable growth.

This principle is particularly true for the Gulf states, which have devoted significant resources and diplomatic efforts to ensuring the stability of their regional neighborhood, both in the Gulf and in the wider Middle East. The geopolitical importance of the Gulf states, given their vast energy resources, places them at the center of global strategic interests. Maintaining regional stability allows the Gulf states to capitalize on these resources while presenting the region as a safe environment for long-term foreign investment. Conversely, instability disrupts economic growth and trade, increases defense spending, and reduces investor confidence, all of which threaten Gulf national interests.

For the Gulf states, stability is not only a political goal, but also an essential driver of economic progress. Sustained periods of peace in the region allow for uninterrupted trade and the continuation of vital infrastructure projects that support long-term economic growth. On the other hand, instability disrupts international trade, oil price volatility, and capital flows. Given their heavy reliance on oil exports and global trade, prolonged instability can have far-reaching consequences for Gulf economies. As a result, Gulf states are prioritizing regional stability to ensure a secure economic future and prosperity for generations to come.

At the same time, major global powers such as the United States, China, and European countries, whose economies are heavily dependent on energy imports from the Gulf, have a significant interest in maintaining peace in the region. This common interest has fostered close cooperation between the Gulf states and these powers to promote the mutual benefits of stability.

International relations literature, however, reveals instances in which regional tensions can sometimes work to the advantage of certain states. While the traditional approach to regional dynamics focuses on the benefits of peace, there are scenarios in which regional tensions can serve the interests of states. When adversaries are preoccupied with conflict, the direct threat they pose to other states is often diminished, allowing medium-sized states, such as those in the Gulf, more strategic space. By staying out of direct regional confrontations, Gulf states can assess the balance of power between larger actors and use this dynamic to their advantage.

By "managed tensions," we mean a situation in which a certain level of regional tension is accepted but does not escalate into full-scale armed confrontation, allowing states to use these tensions to strengthen their strategic position. Managed tension refers to a deliberately maintained state of tensions carefully moderated to ensure they do not escalate into open conflict. These tensions create opportunities for non-participating states to maneuver strategically.



For example, the ongoing tensions between Iran and Israel allow the Gulf states to quietly build up their diplomatic and defense capabilities. Moreover, these tensions can create a balance of power that prevents one party from dominating the region. This balance serves the national interests of the Gulf states, as no regional power can unilaterally assert its influence. By adopting neutral or balanced positions, Gulf states avoid being drawn into conflicts while capitalizing on the strategic space created by these tensions.

Israel's preoccupation with security challenges related to its war on Gaza, its confrontations with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the potential for escalation with Iran, reduces its focus on the Gulf states and hence gives them greater freedom in their regional policies. Moreover, these tensions can serve as leverage for the Gulf states in their dealings with the major powers, especially the United States. Therefore, the recent trend toward normalization of relations between the Gulf states and Israel may, over time, reduce the ability of the Gulf states to exploit these tensions in their diplomatic strategies. On this particular point, Israel's lack of regional integration, combined with the U.S. fixation on its security, serves as key leverage for exerting continued pressure on the U.S. The constant preoccupation of Iran and its militias with confrontation with Israel and the United States weakens its capabilities in the long run and drains its diplomatic, economic, and military resources, which undoubtedly works to the advantage of its neighbors in the Gulf and Central Asia. In times of regional instability, the strategic importance of the Gulf states to the global powers increases. The West relies on the Gulf states to ensure a steady flow of oil and to prevent regional conflicts from escalating into wider crises that could disrupt global energy supplies. This dependence enhances the Gulf states' standing on the international stage, giving them greater diplomatic leverage in their negotiations with major powers. In return for helping to manage conflicts, international pressure on the Gulf states is reduced.

Regional tensions can also create strategic vacuums that the Gulf states can exploit. When regional powers are preoccupied with their own conflicts, Gulf states can move more freely on the international stage, forming new partnerships and strengthening their diplomatic positions. By exploiting these gaps, Gulf states can position themselves as key players in resolving regional conflicts or brokering peace deals, thereby expanding their influence. Tensions between regional actors offer Gulf states opportunities to form new coalitions with major powers involved in the region to manage these tensions.

In conclusion, while regional stability remains critical to the Gulf states' economic growth and the protection of their national interests, **managed regional tensions** can provide unique opportunities to increase diplomatic leverage through careful use of these tensions. The Gulf states can secure their position as indispensable players in the regional and international arenas. However, this approach requires a careful balance to ensure that tensions do not escalate in ways that threaten the stability that Gulf states work so hard to maintain.

Although this may seem like an unconventional perspective on tensions and conflicts, it rests on the simple truth that there are advantages to being out of the spotlight. When neighbors are preoccupied in conflict with each other, it opens the door for one to step in and fill the voids left open. And, often found within those voids are opportunities that might not have been there otherwise.

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