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Africa at Risk: Energy, Logistics, and Food Security Under Middle East Escalation

Michael William Wilson
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Since the United States and Israel launched strikes against Iran in late February 2026, African presidents have called for an end to the regional conflict. Notably, the [African Union](#) decried the “deeply troubling escalation” in the region, which risks global instability and seriously impacts energy markets and food security. The Economic Community of West African States echoed these sentiments, cautioning that “volatile oil and gas flows” will impact West Africa. Countries including Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nigeria condemned the Iranian retaliatory strikes on the Gulf states and called for an immediate ceasefire, as African governments increasingly rely on the Gulf for trade and investment.

African leaders, however, have avoided issuing accusatory [statements](#) towards the United States or Israel, as several African countries are in the process of navigating tense relations with Washington amid tariffs, visa restrictions, and the ongoing reinstatement of the Africa Growth Opportunity Act, which would provide duty-free access to US markets for certain African goods. African leaders cannot risk further provoking Washington and have thus aimed most of their statements at the Iranian aggression in the Gulf.

Senegal and South Africa, however, did warn that Washington and Tel Aviv’s anticipatory strikes set a dangerous precedent that “compromised” the world order, as it could open the door for powers to take unilateral action against foreign leaders with whom they may disagree.

Energy Risks Top the List of Concerns for African States

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has had serious consequences for global commodity prices. Following Iranian strikes on oil facilities in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, Gulf states have been forced to shut down some of their largest refineries, thus reducing the supply of oil available on the market. Some estimates suggest it could take up to five years to repair the damage to Gulf energy infrastructure. Meanwhile, in the short term, it will take several weeks for some oil refineries to become operational.



The closure of the Strait of Hormuz adds further complications; 20% of the world's oil passes through the strait, and with commercial vessels unable to pass, they cannot reach their destinations.

All of these factors introduce significant risks and uncertainty to oil prices. Before the war, crude oil averaged \$78 per barrel, rising sharply to \$118. Meanwhile, refined products averaged [\\$700 per metric](#) tonne just before the war, then jumped to over \$1,400 per metric tonne after the outbreak of war. This is particularly concerning for Africa's import-dependent economies. In 2024, Gulf exports to Africa reached [\\$75 billion](#), with refined petroleum accounting for over \$40 billion of those exports. Rising oil prices will increase inflation, strain foreign exchange reserves, and raise transport costs.

Moreover, the rising cost of imports will exacerbate current account deficits and accelerate currency depreciation, particularly in heavily indebted African economies. In response, Central Banks might be forced to adopt tighter monetary policies over prolonged periods, potentially hindering economic growth and recovery. African economies were beginning to recover marginally from recent global shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and prior commodity market volatility. The current conflict risks reversing these gains by reintroducing inflationary pressures and supply chain instability.

However, the impact varies across the continent. While oil-importing countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal will face macroeconomic shocks, oil-exporting countries such as Nigeria, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea will experience short-term economic benefits from higher energy prices. Nevertheless, there is limited domestic refining capacity across most African exporters; as such, even these economies are exposed to high fuel import costs.

Many African economies also lack sufficient storage capacity to withstand prolonged energy supply shocks. For instance, South Africa has an estimated 2 weeks of energy supply, and Ghana has an estimated 8 weeks of diesel and petrol. Kenya and Ethiopia are protecting their [domestic supplies](#) and thus restricting certain energy exports to neighboring and landlocked countries, including Uganda and Rwanda. Therefore, countries are identifying alternative sources in Asia, the Americas, and Africa.

Mauritius and South Sudan, among others, have introduced energy-saving measures such as planned electricity outages. In South Africa, where prices are expected to increase due to supply shocks, farmers with storage facilities have placed



excessively high orders in recent days before prices rise further; however, this also depletes the oil reserves that countries are already struggling to replenish. The Dangote refinery in Nigeria has provided immediate relief to neighboring importing countries in West Africa. Should the crisis continue, [Dangote](#) cautioned in a meeting with Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, work-from-home measures may have to be imposed as supply cannot meet the growing demand.

Currently producing 650,000 barrels per day, Aliko Dangote aims to raise output to over 1 million barrels per day by 2028. In the long run, this conflict stands to benefit West African economies by reducing their dependence on Gulf imports and by enabling regional alternatives. Nigeria's proximity to West African ports makes trade routes more time-efficient than those to the Gulf states.

The crisis will also emphasize the need for African nations to invest heavily in their oil production, as several countries, including Ghana, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Namibia, and Senegal, have untapped and underdeveloped oil and gas reserves that governments are keen to develop to reduce exposure to global supply shocks.

Trade and Logistics Risks Loom

Africa depends on shipping routes linking the Gulf to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the Gulf states serve as major logistics, trading, and refining hubs for African commodities. Dubai, for instance, is one of Africa's largest gold-trading and refining centers, where raw gold is processed before being re-exported to global markets. Therefore, the Gulf states serve as essential intermediaries within African value chains, facilitating the processing, financing, and redistribution of commodities across various zones in the UAE, thereby supporting trade with Africa.

Recent disruptions to Gulf logistics hubs threaten to impede the flow of African gold and other critical minerals, highlighting their strategic importance. If attacks on Gulf infrastructure continue, these trading hubs risk being perceived as less reliable, prompting African exporters to reconsider and diversify their partners and trade routes and to mitigate potential vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is vital for East African exporters of agricultural goods and other commodities. The strait connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and is a key trade route between the Horn of Africa, the Gulf states, and Asia. For instance, DP World launched a new strategic shipping route in 2025



connecting the UAE's [Jebel Ali Port](#) to the Berbera Port in Somaliland. The service operates every 9 days, with scheduled stops at the Gulf of Aden and Djibouti, then transits to and from landlocked countries to reduce transit times and exposure to regional bottlenecks.

Houthi rebels in Yemen have warned they might target ships passing through Bab el-Mandeb and could close the strait, posing an additional threat to global shipping. As a result, commercial vessels are rerouting via the Cape of Good Hope, which adds to longer transit times and higher costs. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb could fragment vital maritime routes linking the Gulf, Africa, and Asia. Since many African economies depend heavily on imported fuel and food, these disturbances could intensify inflationary pressures.

Food Security Risk

The Gulf states also supply vast quantities of fertilizers, such as urea, which are essential to African agricultural productivity. 45% of urea passes through the Strait of Hormuz; therefore, prolonged disruptions could reduce agricultural output across the continent in the long run and raise food prices, as was the case at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War.

At the same time, Gulf states are increasingly turning towards Africa to tackle their food security challenges. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait have each invested in agricultural land across Ethiopia, Sudan, and Ghana, among other countries. The GCC states have sought to build processing plants and cold storage facilities and expand logistics for agricultural goods to reach the Gulf states.

However, the current regional instability will create significant complications for all the Gulf states, especially Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, as their only access to waterways is via the Strait of Hormuz, whereas Saudi Arabia can trade through the Red Sea, and Oman's Salalah and Duqm ports in the south are situated away from the Strait. The disruptions are thus mutually destabilizing as Africa relies on the Gulf for agricultural inputs and Gulf states depend on Africa for food supply.

Strategic Implications

Saudi Arabia has responded to the crisis by shifting exports towards its Red Sea ports. Saudi Aramco announced it would increase production and exports through its Red Sea Port of Yanbu to avoid the Strait of Hormuz. This shift highlights the potential to reroute GCC Africa trade through the Red Sea, to strengthen Saudi



Arabia's routes through East Africa to protect its exports from Iranian hostilities, and to replace the UAE's dominance as a trading hub for African commodities.

The Gulf states are among Africa's largest investors, as foreign direct investment inflows from the Gulf in 2024 exceeded [USD 97 billion](#). Gulf capital targets energy, infrastructure, agriculture, and various other rapidly growing industries. However, the conflict also raises questions regarding the future of Gulf investment and diversification strategies. Gulf governments may be forced to allocate greater resources to domestic security before delivering on large-scale economic projects in Africa.

The crisis underscores the necessity for African countries to develop and industrialize their economies to become more self-sufficient in energy and food production. The urgency to reduce reliance on refined imports will redirect focus to regional refining hubs, such as Dangote, and to the completion of additional facilities, including the Greenfield Oil Refinery in Uganda and gas fields in Mozambique's Angoche and Zambezi basins. It will also highlight the significance of African commodities satisfying regional demand before they are traded with other partners. In this context, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement will grow increasingly important in promoting regional integration.

For the Gulf and Africa, the trajectory of this trade may need to be split across multiple routes to reduce dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. Consequently, Gulf and African trading partners might opt to conduct trade via Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa to avoid potential disruptions in the Arabian Gulf.

In the short term, African governments must prioritize expanding strategic fuel reserves, diversifying supply sources and trade routes, and containing inflationary pressures from rising commodity prices. In the long term, however, African countries must invest in regional refining capacity, expand fuel storage infrastructure, and strengthen intra-African trade networks to improve their resilience to global shocks.

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مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)**

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Riyadh**

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Geneva**

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels**

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

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