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After the Strikes: Rebuilding Gulf-Iran Relations and the Future of Gulf Security

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The latest escalation involving Iranian strikes across the Gulf has once again underscored the need for a more comprehensive and resilient regional security architecture. More than many previous crisis, the confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has highlighted important challenges within the Gulf security order. It has underscored the limitations of existing security arrangements, the fragility of de-escalation efforts, and the need to reconsider how regional stability can be sustained in an increasingly complex strategic environment.

The conflict therefore represents a "moment of reflection" for regional actors. It has drawn attention to the limits of external security guarantees, the risks associated with strategic miscalculation, the absence of institutionalized dialogue among regional neighbors, and the difficulties that existing mechanisms face in preventing regional crises from affecting Gulf security. The assumption that the Gulf could remain insulated from wider regional conflicts has become increasingly difficult to sustain.

For the GCC states, the strikes on Gulf territory have raised serious concerns regarding trust and the future trajectory of relations with Iran. In recent years, Gulf governments invested considerable political capital in rebuilding relations with Tehran through dialogue and confidence-building initiatives. The expectation was that, despite broader geopolitical tensions, there would remain clear limits to escalation, particularly regarding actions affecting neighboring states that had consistently advocated dialogue and restraint.

These expectations have come under considerable strain. The strikes demonstrated that Gulf territory could become affected by broader regional confrontations because of the presence of foreign military facilities, despite Gulf states not being directly involved in decisions surrounding military operations undertaken by external powers. From the GCC perspective, hosting allied military forces does not diminish national sovereignty nor justify attacks against civilian or strategic infrastructure. Once Gulf territory is directly affected, maintaining neutrality becomes considerably more challenging.

One of the clearest lessons from the conflict has been the need to reassess aspects of the Gulf's existing security architecture. The crisis raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of external security guarantees, the resilience of national and regional air and missile defence systems, the availability of credible deterrence, and the protection of maritime security in one of the world's most strategically



significant waterways. It also highlighted the need to strengthen collective preparedness for future crises.

The conflict has also highlighted the limitations of two key approaches that have shaped Gulf regional policy in recent years: diplomatic engagement with regional actors and efforts to avoid direct involvement in regional conflicts. Gulf policymakers have generally viewed these as tools for managing, rather than eliminating, security risks. Recent developments have demonstrated that, while these approaches remain important, they are not sufficient on their own. Equally significant has been the realization that international support and security guarantees have not always materialized when these approaches reached their limits. Iran, however, views the crisis through a different strategic lens. Tehran argues that Gulf states cannot entirely separate themselves from United States military operations conducted from facilities located within the region. Iranian officials also point to what they view as inconsistencies in Washington's regional policy and argue that divisions among external actors have complicated diplomatic initiatives. From Tehran's perspective, addressing the role of external military actors remains central to any future regional security dialogue.

These differing perspectives illustrate one of the region's central challenges. Iran views the Gulf's strategic partnerships with the United States as an important element of its security concerns, while GCC states continue to view Iran's missile capabilities, regional activities, and support for non-state actors as significant sources of uncertainty. Without institutional mechanisms capable of addressing these differing threat perceptions, future crises may continue to carry significant risks of escalation.

This also reinforced another important lesson: regional security cannot rely solely on crisis management. While immediate priorities remain the cessation of hostilities, protection of maritime navigation, and implementation of existing understandings, longer-term stability will require sustained dialogue supported by practical confidence-building measures. The existing Memorandum of Understanding between Iran and the US provides a useful starting point for more structured GCC-Iran engagement. However, dialogue should gradually evolve beyond periodic meetings toward a more permanent institutional framework. Establishing dedicated focal points within the GCC Secretariat, Iranian institutions, and participating foreign ministries would provide continuity, preserve institutional memory, monitor implementation, and help ensure that diplomatic engagement remains consistent over time.



Photo Source: [Foreign Policy](#) (2026)

The recent crisis has also highlighted the importance of strengthening Gulf security cooperation. Future arrangements could place greater emphasis on regular institutional coordination, information and intelligence sharing, maritime security cooperation, and collective assessments of emerging risks. Strengthening coordination among the six GCC member states would provide a stronger foundation for engaging other regional actors through structured dialogue as confidence gradually develops.

Equally important is reaching consensus on the nature of the challenges that any future regional security framework is intended to address. Rather than focusing exclusively on individual sources of threat, participating states could prioritize areas of shared concern, including the protection of freedom of navigation, the security of critical energy infrastructure, counterterrorism, combating transnational organized crime, safeguarding civilian infrastructure, and promoting respect for international law. Building cooperation around common interests offers a practical basis for gradually strengthening regional confidence.

External actors will continue to play an important role. The United States remains a significant strategic partner for many Gulf states, while Europe can continue to support dialogue through diplomacy, technical expertise, and neutral platforms for engagement. At the same time, recent developments suggest that greater regional ownership will be essential to building a more sustainable and resilient security framework.



Ultimately, the recent escalation has highlighted both the vulnerabilities of the current regional order and the importance of strengthening mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. While trust has undoubtedly been affected, diplomacy remains the most viable path toward reducing tensions and preventing future crises. The challenge now is to translate the lessons of this conflict into practical steps that strengthen regional resilience, institutionalize dialogue, and gradually build a more stable and cooperative Gulf security architecture.

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