المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

13th Gulf Studies Forum

- Gulf Security and the US-Israel War on Iran
- Language Policies in the Arab Gulf Countries: Contexts, Trends, and Content

21-22 November 2026

Concept Note

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Track 1: Gulf Security and the US-Israel War on Iran

The US-Israel war on Iran, aimed at bringing about radical change by overthrowing the Iranian regime or subjugating it, has reshaped the security environment in the Gulf region, placing it at the heart of a complex crisis that threatens the stability of Gulf states, maritime security, and world energy supplies. Israel had spent many years inciting the war. Within the first few hours, the conflict had left several Iranian political, military, and security leaders dead – most notably Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – while Iran had launched a series of attacks targeting the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The Iranian response included ballistic missile, cruise missile, and drone attacks against military, civilian, and economic sites and facilities, as part of a strategy aimed at raising the cost of the confrontation for the US and its allies, as well as triggering a shock in the global economy, thereby exerting pressure on them to halt military operations.[1]

The Gulf states have been an integral part of the theatre of operations, due to their geographical location, their role within the global energy system, their close ties to international trade networks,[2] and their strategic security and military partnerships. Despite being directly targeted by Iranian attacks, they have opted for a cautious approach, balancing self-defence with the imperative of avoiding a full-scale confrontation with Iran.[3]

This war has presented an unprecedented challenge to the Gulf states, bringing with it direct security threats that have placed these states at the heart of the confrontation, with repercussions that are likely to last well beyond the end of direct hostilities.[4] Thus, the issue of Gulf security has ceased to be a mere set of transient threats, and re-emerged as an existential question. This necessitates considering new and unconventional approaches to protecting the region's security and ensuring its future stability, especially given the growing realization that reliance on existing security systems and structures will no longer suffice to address these emerging challenges.

In this context, the 13th Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum will examine the security challenges that the US-Israel war against Iran poses to the Gulf region, ways to address them, and the ability of the Gulf Arab states to adapt to these challenges. The forum will discuss the role of existing political and military alliances and their effectiveness in achieving regional security and stability, especially since the current confrontation has called into question the strategic viability of

1 "The Gulf in the Line of Fire: The Calculations and Contradictions of Iranian Strategy," *Situation Assessment*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 8/3/2026, accessed on 13/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9GC

2 Jassim Mohammed Al-Kuwari, "Strategic Transformations in Gulf Security: From Negotiation and Deterrence to Engagement," *Middle East Council for International Affairs*, 18/3/2026, accessed on 13/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBy1CqI

3 "The Gulf Cooperation Council: We will not remain hostage to Iran's policies, and we will find alternatives to the Strait of Hormuz," *Al Jazeera,* 27/3/2026 (in Arabic), accessed on 6/4/2026, https://acr.ps/1L9B9wt

4 Despite their general tendency to avoid direct involvement in conflict, a clear divergence has emerged in the Gulf states' positions on the war. Oman has adopted an explicitly anti-war stance, publicly condemning the aggression against Iran, while Qatar has emphasized diplomatic solutions, consistent with its role as a mediator, although it did expel the Iranian military attaché after the attack on the vital gas facility in Ras Laffan. By contrast, the UAE and Bahrain have appeared more receptive, at the strategic level, to the idea of weakening Iran militarily, seeing the country as a structural threat to Gulf security. Saudi Arabia has adopted a more ambiguous position, officially affirming its support for diplomatic solutions and its refusal to allow the use of its airspace for attacks, while media reports and leaks suggest a more complex stance.

security arrangements with the US, and raised fundamental questions about the effectiveness of military alliances in providing an efficient "security umbrella" that protects the sovereignty of these states from external threats. The Forum will further address the most prominent economic threats facing countries in the region as a result of the war – first and foremost, the disruption of energy exports and impacts on energy security – in addition to discussing the future of the GCC as a joint security and defence framework.

1. Security Repercussions for the Arab Gulf States

Since the beginning of the war, the Arab Gulf states have been subjected to intensive attacks targeting their airports, seaports, military bases, and key facilities, including energy installations, financial centres, data centres, and residential areas. They were able to repel the majority of these attacks thanks to their vast investments in air defence systems, which have indeed proved highly effective.[5] Over the years leading up to the war, the Gulf states had invested heavily in developing advanced defence systems, particularly against missiles, and have worked to strengthen their security ties with the US as well as enhancing regional cooperation. At the same time, they had sought to improve their relations with Iran to reduce the risk of escalation and minimize the likelihood they would be targeted. However, despite their public opposition to the US-Israel assault, these countries immediately found themselves at the heart of the conflict.

Iran's attacks had major economic repercussions for the Gulf states, whose energy facilities were targeted in the very first hours of the war. As Israel escalated its attacks on Iranian energy facilities,[6] Iran escalated its own attacks on its Arab neighbours' energy facilities. This forced Qatar to halt the production of liquefied natural gas (LNG) after one of the world's largest LNG production and export facilities, in Ras Laffan,[7] was directly targeted, prompting Doha to declare force majeure and announce it was halting exports. In the United Arab Emirates, authorities were forced to suspend operations at the Habshan gas facility and the Bab field.[8] Oil refineries in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were also subjected to several attacks.[9]

Meanwhile, Iran imposed a blockade on the Strait of Hormuz, the waterway through which most of the oil and gas produced in the Gulf passes to the rest of the world.[10] Kuwait was forced to

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5 :at ,2026/4/accessed on 6 ,2026/3/Not Our War': Gulf States Weigh up Options as Existential Threat from Iran Conflict Grows," *The Guardian*, 20'" https://acr.ps/1L9B9Re

6 "Iran Blames Israel for Gas Field Attack, Fires Missiles at Qatar and Saudi Energy Facilities," *Reuters*, 17/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9Ba7p

7 "Qatar Energy halts LNG production", *Qatar News Agency*, 2/3/2026, accessed on 5/4/2026 (in Arabic), at: https://acr.ps/1L9Bad8

8 "Operations at Habshan gas facilities in the UAE suspended after missiles intercepted," *Reuters*, 19/3/2026, accessed on 5/4/2026 (in Arabic), at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9Sp

9 Operations at the Ras Tanura refinery in Saudi Arabia resumed on 18 March 2026 after it was shut down following an attack. See: "Operations resume at Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura refinery after it was shut down following a drone attack," *Al-Sharq*, 18/3/2026, accessed 5/4/2026 (in Arabic), at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9J3

10 "Not our war."

reduce its oil production to levels barely sufficient to meet domestic needs,[11] as it was unable to export crude due to the Strait's closure, and has limited storage capacity. Iraq also announced it was slashing production by approximately 1.5 million barrels per day, while Saudi Arabia attempted to compensate for its own losses by exporting through its Red Sea ports. Maritime trade through the Gulf was severely affected; oil tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz dwindled to a trickle, halting about 20 percent of global oil and LNG exports.[12] At the time of writing, more than a month after the war began, some 2,000 ships remained stranded in the Gulf,[13] reflecting further disruption to global supply chains. The crisis also increased the operating costs of Gulf energy exports, as war risk insurance premiums for ships operating in the Gulf jumped fivefold.

The war's repercussions were not limited to the energy sector; they also threaten to derail the Arab Gulf States' economic diversification strategies.[14] The region's tourism sector is expected to decline heavily this year, with a drop of between 11 and 27 percent in international visitor numbers, or a loss of $34 billion to $56 billion in visitor spending.[15] Cyberattacks targeting data centres in the UAE and Bahrain demonstrated that digital infrastructure had also become a target, threatening Gulf states' ambitions to become global information and technology hubs, in light of the vulnerability of cloud computing systems, data storage, and digital services.

2. The Gulf Arab States' Defensive Capabilities

The war also revealed, for the first time, the Gulf Arab states' defensive capabilities, as evidenced by their high rates of success in repelling Iranian attacks. This was largely down to the effectiveness and advanced operational capabilities of their air and missile defence systems,[16] which enabled the countries of the region to defend themselves without triggering an escalation towards a full-scale war. Material damage remained relatively limited, and life to a large degre continued as normal. Gulf investments in multi-layered air and missile defence systems (combining US, European, Russian, Chinese, and South Korean systems)[17] played a crucial role in achieving these outcomes.

11 "Kuwait Declares Force Majeure, Cuts Crude Oil Output Due to Middle East Conflict," *Reuters*, 7/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9CV

12 "What a Battle to Reopen the Strait of Hormuz Would Look Like," *The Economist*, 24/3/2026, accessed on 5/4/2026 at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9GH

13 "20,000 Seafarers Stuck in Persian Gulf: Maritime Chief," *The Wall Street Journal*, 26/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9Ba3X

14 It could also lead to a broader erosion of investor confidence; the war's impacts could extend to the sovereign investments of entire countries. More broadly, economic diversification initiatives, particularly in Saudi Arabia, face renewed challenges. Even before the war, several major projects were experiencing delays and funding constraints, as foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows failed to meet expectations. The current conflict is exacerbating these difficulties by discouraging further FDI. See: "Caught in the Crossfire: Gulf Security and Strategy in the US–Israel War on Iran," Political Studies Unit, Arab Center Washington DC, 19/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BakG

15 "The Gulf in the Line of Fire."

16 Rashid Al-Mohanadi, "How Gulf Defence Capabilities Are Preventing Further Escalation with Iran," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 15/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBy1Cup

17 Alia Chughtai & Marium Ali, "What are the GCC's Air Defence Capabilities?," *Al Jazeera*, 19/9/2025, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BabD

Over more than a decade, the Gulf states have invested heavily in modern air and missile defence systems, building multi-layered defence structures centred on Anti-Access/Area Denial (or A2/AD) capabilities. These investments have clearly demonstrated their operational value, countering a wide range of threats including ballistic and cruise missiles, one-way attack drones, and even tactical aircraft. The integration of early warning and multi-domain interception systems, along with inter-system coordination, helped protect civilian populations, military installations, and critical infrastructure from attacks. Region-wide, interception rates have exceeded 90 percent.[18]

In addition, the GCC states have significant airpower capabilities, including hundreds of modern fighter jets, and attack helicopters equipped with advanced cannons, which have been deployed to intercept and shoot down drones. They also have large stockpiles of air-to-air missiles. In naval terms, most GCC states – with the exception of Kuwait – have vessels equipped with surface-to-air missile systems that can be used to intercept drones when necessary.[19]

Alongside these defensive capabilities, the Gulf states have a diverse range of offensive capabilities, including cruise missiles capable of carrying out long-range strikes, advanced air platforms with extended combat ranges, and short-range ballistic missile systems. Combat drones have also been incorporated into this arsenal, although the sizes of these stockpiles largely remain undisclosed.[20]

The Gulf Arab states also rely on a network of international partners who have provided various forms of military support.[21] French and British aircraft have already intercepted Iranian drones targeting Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, while the US has deployed a range of air defence systems, including THAAD and Patriot, as well as aircraft dedicated to protecting its own bases throughout the Arabian Peninsula.[22]

Over the preceding decade, the Gulf Arab states had concluded a series of arms deals, many of which are expected to enter service in the near future. The conflict of early 2026 is likely to accelerate these states' acquisition of additional air defence systems and interceptor missiles. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have already signed contracts with Ukraine[23] to acquire operational drone interception systems.[24]

18 Al-Mohanadi.

19 The UAE's medium-range air defence systems include Israeli and South Korean systems, while Saudi Arabia operates Avenger and Crotale short-range air defence systems, among others. The Gulf states possess varying numbers of ships equipped with SAM systems, with the UAE leading the way, followed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. See: "Defending the Skies of the Arab Gulf States," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 18/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9R4

20 The Gulf states' ground-attack cruise missiles include the Storm Shadow, with a range of approximately 400 kilometers. Their air platforms include Tornado IDS, Typhoon, and F-15SA (Saudi Advanced) Eagle aircraft (Saudi Arabia); Mirage 2000s (UAE); and Rafale, Typhoon, and F-15SA aircraft (Qatar). Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have short-range ballistic missile systems, varying in range and operational capabilities. All the Gulf states except Bahrain have combat drones. See: "The Gulf States' Offensive Options against Iran," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 16/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9Ba5N

21 This support includes fighter jets, AEW&C (Airborne Early Warning and Control) aircraft, air-to-air missiles, air defense batteries, and additional interceptor missiles, along with counter-drone systems and specialists.

22 "Defending the Skies of the Arab Gulf States."

23 "Ukraine and Saudi Arabia Sign Deal on Defence Cooperation, Zelenskiy Says," *Reuters*, 27/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9tP

24 "Defending the Skies of the Arab Gulf States."

The Gulf Arab states' defence spending per capita is among the highest in the world, reaching approximately $115 billion in 2023. Saudi Arabia accounted for the largest share, with a budget of at least $69 billion, the world's seventh-biggest defence budget. This was followed by the UAE with $20.7 billion, Qatar with $9.02 billion, Kuwait with $7.77 billion, Oman with $6.5 billion, and finally Bahrain with $1.4 billion.[25] The GCC states collectively have some 2,000 military aircraft, including F-15 and F-18 fighter jets.[26]

The war served as a clear practical test of years of efforts to strengthen and integrate Gulf air defence systems. These systems proved themselves effective in countering Iran's persistent attacks. However, the war also revealed some vulnerabilities, particularly against one-way attack drones, which remain particularly difficult to intercept. Furthermore, challenges related to sustainability, integration, and countering asymmetric threats necessitate a consideration of a more integrated and effective regional air defence system.

The conflict of early 2026 is likely to accelerate efforts to develop more effective capabilities to counter this evolving type of threat. The present crisis could serve as the impetus for establishing a unified air defence system based on shared infrastructure, representing a step towards building a more independent Gulf regional security framework, rather than relying on ad hoc coordination and diversifying security and military partnerships. This shift would enhance the ability of the GCC states to influence and contribute to shaping the regional security landscape, rather than simply adapting to it. Nevertheless, structural challenges remain that could hinder the realization of this objective.

3. The Fate of Security/Military Alliances and Potential Impact on Them

The Arab Gulf states have demonstrated considerable restraint in the face of Iranian attacks. However, this war is likely to represent a turning point, prompting them to reconsider their security needs on a fundamental level. Having come under Iranian attack for a second time in less than a year, as well as the Israeli attack on Qatar in September 2025 – and despite the presence of US bases on their territories – some Gulf officials have begun to question the viability of relying on the US to guarantee their security. Some voices have started to argue that this presence is a liability, or even a cause for attacks, and that the Gulf states have found themselves protecting the US rather than being protected by it.[27] Conversely, some in the US and Israel are arguing the exact opposite: that the war has deepens the GCC states' dependence on Washington, and should encourage a rush toward normalization with Israel, potentially leading to the latter being publicly recognized as a member in a regional alliance with the GCC states.

25 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2024* (London: Routledge, 2024).

26 "Not our war."

27 "The Gulf in the Line of Fire."

The regional order in the Gulf has long relied on US security guarantees against Iran, a dependence reinforced by the belief among some Gulf leaders that they had forged better relationships with the Trump administration than with its predecessors, particularly with President Donald Trump's focus on economic opportunities. However, the latest conflict has directly impacted the vital interests and security of the Gulf Arab states, and the US fought it in partnership with Israel, whose interests it prioritized. All this has revealed a growing crisis of trust. Israel's agenda of regime change is also deeply troubling to some Gulf states, given the potential for the collapse of Iranian state institutions and the resulting regional repercussions – which would be difficult to contain, especially for the GCC states. At the same time, there are growing doubts about the ability – or even willingness – of the US to provide adequate protection, whether by securing oil installations and shipping lanes, or by supplying its allies with the interceptor missiles necessary to counter Iranian attacks. Consequently, there is a growing public perception across the GCC that US military bases are transforming from a deterrent and a source of security into a liability.[28]

This growing sense of insecurity is a shock to a region that had long believed itself immune to the turmoil that has rocked its surroundings since the US invasion of Iraq. The war with Iran has forcefully, and perhaps permanently, forced the Gulf Arab states to confront their harsh geopolitical situation, in which the threat of being targeted by Iran is no longer a theoretical possibility, but a tangible reality. If they cannot reach an understanding with the Iranian regime, within a comprehensive regional security framework, the Gulf states will continue to feel a constant threat to their immediate security and to oil export lanes. Should the regime collapse and the Iranian state disintegrate, the region would face even more dangerous scenarios, including mass flows of refugees, disruption of maritime traffic, the spread of extremism, and the spillover of conflicts across borders. A slide towards the collapse of the Iranian state, in a country with a population exceeding 90 million and a complex ethnic makeup, would create an environment of long-term instability on the eastern border of the Arabian Peninsula. Most importantly, there is a growing realization that reliance on the US for protection is no longer a given.[29]

The war therefore raises fundamental questions about the future of American security guarantees in the region. As the Gulf states assess the conduct of US forces during the conflict, there are likely to be intense discussions about the reliability and adequacy of this protection. This could accelerate Gulf governments' efforts to diversify security partnerships, including expanding engagement with other powers such as Türkiye, Pakistan, and India.[30] The Gulf states may also find it necessary to strengthen their ties with middle powers in Europe and East Asia, countries that are significantly affected when the foundations of the international order are under pressure.[31]

28 Marc Lynch, "The United States Could Lose the Gulf," *Foreign Policy*, 5/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9Ba6Z

29 Ibid.

30 "Caught in the Crossfire."

31 Al-Mohanadi.

It took only a few days for the Iranian attacks to compel the Gulf states, which had for decades relied on US security guarantees, to recognize the need to bolster their own defence capabilities. Despite the presence of major American bases in the region, they have faced tangible challenges, first and foremost the high cost and global shortage of American interceptor missiles. In this context, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE sought to leverage Ukrainian expertise in countering drones, while the UAE received support from France and Australia. Several Gulf states asked Italy to supply them with anti-drone and air defence systems. These moves reflect growing scepticism among the Gulf states regarding the effectiveness of American security guarantees. While all these countries have close security partnerships with the US – which has designated Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain as Major Non-NATO Allies, and the UAE as a Major Defence Partner[32] – the ongoing conflict with Iran has heightened doubts over the reliability of these guarantees, and fuelled increasing criticism of the protection that Washington provides in practice. Oman's Foreign Minister, Badr al-Busaidi, has said that it is time for Gulf states to reconsider their defence strategies, amidst a regional debate[33] about the effectiveness of existing security arrangements.

4. Energy Security

Iran's attacks on the GCC states have posed the most serious threat to their physical security since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990–1991), impacting key sectors such as aviation and tourism, which are cornerstones of these states' economic diversification strategies. The greatest economic threat comes in the form of the disruption of energy exports. Closing the Strait of Hormuz effectively cuts off a significant portion of Gulf oil and gas exports from world markets, with profound repercussions for both national revenues and global markets. Despite efforts by some countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, to develop alternative export routes – first and foremost, the East-West pipeline to the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea – these options are only a partial solution, with the capacity to handle a portion of exports, estimated at around five million barrels per day (bpd).[34]

Indeed, the war with Iran has exposed the fragility of the Gulf's energy-dependent economies. Disruptions to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz have led to an accumulation of oil and gas in storage facilities, forcing some countries to cut production due to their limited storage capacity. In this context, Saudi Arabia was forced to cut its production by about two million bpd.[35] Despite the Gulf states' preparations for such scenarios, the conflict has shown that these measures are still not enough to cope with a prolonged, widespread disruption to trade and energy routes. Nor are

32 "Sucked Into War, Gulf Countries Face the Limits of U.S. Security Guarantees," *The New York Times*, 17/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9PK

33 "Omani Foreign Minister: The goal of the war is to change the region, prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and push for normalization," *Arabi21*, 12/3/2026, accessed on 5/4/2026 (in Arabic), at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9PK

34 "Caught in the Crossfire."

35 Its oil production fell to around eight million bpd following the suspension of operations at the offshore Safaniya and Zuluf fields. See: "Two sources: Saudi Arabia cuts oil production to around 8 million bpd," *Reuters*, 13/3/2026, accessed on 5/4/2026 (in Arabic), at: https://acr.ps/1L9Baj9 these alternative routes themselves devoid of risks – especially given the involvement of the Yemeni Houthi movement in the conflict, which raises fears over disruption to shipping via the Bab al-Mandeb Strait,[36] another vital chokepoint, at the entrance to the Red Sea. Should both the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb be disrupted simultaneously, the Gulf states would face unprecedented constraints to their export capacity. Taken together, these factors raise the prospect of an economic contraction, the severity of which would depend on the duration and intensity of the conflict.[37]

The Gulf states share a vital economic interest in resuming oil and gas flows. While exports through the Strait of Hormuz were impossible at the time of writing, these states only have limited storage capacity, sufficient for about three weeks. This has forced them to reduce production as this storage fills up. According to estimates by the International Energy Agency (IEA), the capacity of pipelines in Saudi Arabia and the UAE that bypass the Strait ranges between 3.5 and 5.5 million barrels per day, which can only partially ameliorate for the disruption of some 20 million barrels per day that transited the Strait in 2025.[38]

The shipping and energy sectors have been at the heart of the latest escalation, as about 30 percent of the world's seaborne crude oil trade and about 20 percent of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) pass through the Strait of Hormuz.[39] Escalating security risks and rising insurance premiums have led many shipping operators to avoid transiting the Strait, resulting in a backlog of commercial vessels outside it.

Any prolonged disruption to shipping will disrupt oil and gas flows to global markets, particularly affecting the countries most reliant on Middle Eastern supplies. While some importers can dip into their strategic reserves to compensate for the shortfall, such a solution is temporary and unsustainable. The data show that over 38 percent of China's seaborne crude oil imports come from the Gulf. Japan is even more dependent on the region's oil, especially from Saudi Arabia. The impact of the disruption on Europe is different; an estimated 45 percent of European jet fuel originates from the region. Exporting countries will not be immune to these repercussions either; Iraq, which relies on oil for about 90 percent of state revenue, will face significant financial pressure if the disruption continues. The severity of the disruption will remain linked to the duration and level of escalation, as well as to the degree to which Iran intensifies its attacks on energy infrastructure and threatens maritime navigation. This decision will be shaped, in part, by Iran's own energy interests and calculations.[40]

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36 On the 29th day of the US-Israel war on Iran, the Houthis launched missiles for the first time towards the Israeli cities of Beersheba and Eilat.

37 "Caught in the Crossfire."

38 International Energy Agency (IEA), "Strait of Hormuz," *Factsheet*, February 2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9So

39 Ibid.

40 Iran's own calculations are affected by market factors. Ship-tracking data indicated that at the time of writing, it had approximately 200 million barrels of oil stored on tankers or on the way to markets. If it is unable to export through the Strait of Hormuz during a conflict, it could partially rely on reserves stored outside the Gulf, although export volumes and prices remain tied to global demand levels. See: Elizabeth Dent et al., "War Comes to the Gulf," *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 3/3/2026, accessed on 13/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBy2siR

5. The Future of the GCC as a Security and Defence Framework

The US-Israel war on Iran indicates that Gulf security can no longer be managed through unilateral, national approaches or by total reliance on the American security umbrella. Rather, it has become a collective regional issue, requiring a reformulation of the entire GCC's joint deterrence and defence system. In this context, moving forward, these states are likely to open up to international military partnerships beyond the US, while in parallel strengthening their domestic capabilities – particularly in the areas of air and missile defence, cybersecurity, and the protection of maritime routes. Ultimately, the ability of the Gulf states to formulate a collective vision for regional security – one that balances the demands of deterrence with the imperatives of economic stability and integration into the global energy system – will remain a crucial factor in shaping the architecture of stability and the future of security arrangements in the region over the next decade.[41] It is clear that the repercussions of this conflict will extend well beyond the cessation of hostilities. For the Gulf states, its political, economic, and security impacts are likely to persist into the future, and profoundly contribute to reshaping their policies and strategic orientations.[42]

The shock the war has delivered to the region is unprecedented in the modern history of the Gulf states. While previous crises were usually limited to one or two member states of the GCC, the war with Iran has precipitated a broad, region-wide confrontation involving all six Gulf Arab states, albeit to varying degrees. The question now is whether this crisis will push the Gulf states towards a genuine collective response. There are already indications that some actors have begun to consider embarking on such a project. From the establishment of the GCC in 1981, through the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, to the current war with Iran, collective security initiatives have faltered due to the reluctance of member states to share the burden, their preference for bilateral partnerships with external powers, and the absence of a shared perception of the threats.

Even if the war does not develop into a protracted conflict, rebuilding trust and diplomatic relations with Tehran will not be a quick process. For a start, even though the Gulf states and Iran had made significant progress toward de-escalation in recent years, this momentum was disrupted twice by Israeli-American attacks on Iran, in June 2025 and again in February-April 2026.[43] Doubts about the reliability of American security guarantees are also likely to increase, especially since Washington's actions have exposed the Gulf states to danger. Furthermore, American decisions before and during the war have revealed divergent visions of regional security and stability, as well as exposing the limits of the ability of Gulf leaders to influence the White House, despite their pledges to invest over $3 trillion in the US economy since Trump's return to the presidency in January 2025. These are major strategic issues that have become increasingly urgent as the war unfolded, with the escalation of its direct and indirect economic and social impacts.

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41 Al-Kuwari.

42 Al-Mohanadi.

43 "The Gulf States' Offensive Options against Iran."

The Gulf states recognize that the war on Iran has confronted them with unwelcome risks, and that they must take the necessary measures to mitigate the consequences, including the potential for escalation to the point where each side destroys the other's critical infrastructure.[44] However, the GCC governments do not act as a unified bloc; rather, they adopt divergent policies toward Iran and Israel, and sometimes exhibit noticeable tensions between themselves. Some countries appear more capable of withstanding a protracted war, while others appear able to make do with support they have received from the US.[45]

The overall trajectory of the war remains unclear, but the post-conflict phase will be fraught with risks. One of the gravest is the potential for state collapse or exacerbated instability within Iran. The erosion of state authority, as we have seen in Iraq and Syria, could create a new and unpredictable source of instability in the region. Further risks lie in the direction of Israel's regional policy should Iran be significantly weakened or disintegrate. In such a scenario, within a shifting strategic environment, Israel could pose an additional threat to the Gulf states. However developments unfold, the regional order is already undergoing profound transformations, requiring decision-makers in the Arab Gulf states to carefully assess the implications of these shifts in the landscape of regional security and stability.[46]

6. Proposed Themes

Based on the foregoing, the 13th round of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum will examine issues related to the security of the Arab Gulf states in light of the American-Israeli war on Iran and its repercussions, specifically through the following themes:

- The security and strategic threats facing the Arab Gulf states in light of the war on Iran.
- The repercussions of the war on the energy, food, and water security of the Arab Gulf states, and the consequent need to reassess energy infrastructure and trade routes.
- The political, economic, and social repercussions of the war on the Arab Gulf states.
- The military and defence capabilities of the Gulf states, and their ability to adapt to the challenges posed by the war.
- The nature of existing political and military alliances and their likely evolution in light of the war.
- The strategic viability of security arrangements with the US.
- The diversification of Gulf security partnerships.
- The repercussions of the war for the future of military and security industries in the Gulf states.
- The impact of the conflict on regional power balances.
- The future of the GCC as a security and defence system, and prospects for developing it.

44 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The GCC States and the War on Iran: Rethinking Responses to Unwanted Consequences," Arab Center Washington DC, 19/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9TS

45 "Sucked Into War."

46 "From Passive to Active Defense: Gulf Countries' Options in Responding to Iran's Aggression," Emirates Policy Center, 6/3/2026, accessed on 6/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9O0

Trak 2: Language Policies in the Arab Gulf Countries: Contexts, Trends, and Content

In late 2025, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies announced the completion of the Doha Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language, a project on which it had been working for over a decade, with contributions from hundreds of linguistic and lexicographical experts.

It is notable that the first historical dictionary of the Arabic language bears the name "Doha", the capital of Qatar and one of the major cities in the Gulf region. Beyond what this name suggests, linguistic issues are of major significance in the modern Gulf state, perhaps even more so than in the Levant. While the Gulf state has only belatedly and to a limited degree established academic institutions such as scientific or linguistic institutions,[47] it has, by contrast, created several centres for the preservation of the Arabic language, exceeding in number and scope of activity those established in the Levant.[48] It has also launched massive projects related to the Arabic language, including awards dedicated to the language and linguistic arts,[49] in addition to historical dictionaries, which are among the largest projects in the field.

1. The Centrality of the Language Issue in the Modern Gulf State

The centrality of the Arabic language in the modern Gulf state is linked to that of Arab identity itself, which was a foundational concern, particularly during the wave of independence from colonialism in the early 1970s. The founding documents of the Gulf states demonstrate how these states – which emerged as small entities in the shadow of larger regional powers – sought to align themselves with the established centres of Arab identity. Thus, the Arab identity of the Gulf states was not the product of a nationalist movement, as was the case in the Levant. Nor was it a conceptual and intellectual tool used to liberate those states from the clutches of settler colonialism, as was the case in the Maghreb. Rather, it was an element that connected these states to a broader political and cultural sphere, one that they desperately needed during this formative period. Hence, the question of language was a primary issue for the post-independence Gulf states, and pervaded all the frameworks governing their functioning, from constitutions to laws, policies, and so on.[50]

If the issue of language was primarily predicated on the question of identity during the formative and nation-building phases of the Gulf states, other key factors soon came to the fore. Most significant

47 For example, the Arabic Language Academy in Sharjah, which was established in 2016, and the King Salman Global Academy for Arabic, established in 2020.

48 For example: the UAE's Society for the Protection of the Arabic Language, the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, the Arabic Language Association in Qatar, and the Kuwaiti Arabic Language Association.

49 These include the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture, funded by Sheikh Sultan Al Qasimi, the Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding, the Doha Arabic Book Prize, the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Award for Translation, and many others.

50 *The Linguistic Reality of Arabic in the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council States* (Muscat: Center for Translation, Arabization, and Arabic Language Promotion, 2025), (in Arabic), pp. 23, 72, 124, 180, 232, 281, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9kM among them was the fact that Gulf societies, due to the massive wealth that resulted from their discovery and export of oil, experienced huge influxes of job seekers from diverse nationalities and cultures, speaking many different languages. This reached the point where in some Gulf countries – particularly the UAE and Qatar – citizens made up as little as 12 percent of the total population.[51]

In fact, Gulf and Arabian Peninsula societies' exposure to non-Arabic languages and dialects did not begin with the social transformations they underwent after the discovery of oil. Rather, languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Swahili, Persian, and Balochi already coexisted here, as a result of long-running trade between these societies and the Indian Ocean region well before the discovery of oil. This trade led to the immigration of non-Arab ethnic groups, who gradually integrated into the region's administrative and political institutions.

Today, dozens of languages are spoken in the Gulf societies, in addition to Arabic. These include English, Urdu, Persian, Bengali, Hindi, Malayalam, and Tagalog (Filipino), as well as languages from Central and East Asia, East Africa, and Eastern Europe. This is all in addition to the diverse Arabic dialects spoken throughout the region and the ancient languages of the Arabian Peninsula, such as Shehri, ancient Himyaritic, and their related languages in southern Oman, ancient Yemen, and southern Saudi Arabia.

At the heart of this complex linguistic landscape, English has become a common language for communication among people from diverse ethnic backgrounds; undoubtedly one of the most significant features of this linguistic landscape.

The historical roots of language policies in the Gulf countries were particularly marked by the introduction of English into the formal school curriculum, a process that began in the early 20th century. For example, the administrators of the Mubarakiya School in Kuwait, founded in 1912, were reluctant to include English in the curriculum. Kuwaiti society was not yet accustomed to it as a foreign language, and had only recently come under the influence of the Ottoman Empire; many Kuwaitis harboured resentment towards foreigners, whom they perceived as enemies of the state. This reluctance of the school's board prevented Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Rashid from developing the curriculum, as he wanted to introduce English, but his request was denied.[52] Consequently, in 1921, the people of Kuwait established the Ahmadiyya School, which placed the teaching of English at the heart of its curriculum.[53] In Bahrain, the situation is somewhat different. British sources indicate that the Ballout School established by the American Mission, for example, faced resistance due to the Christian teachings it offered. However, there was also a movement to establish a school specifically

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51 "National and Foreign Populations in GCC Countries," *GLMM Factsheet*, no. 13, Gulf Research Center, February 2025, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9B9MA

52 Bader al-Zuwayr & Hamad Abdullah, *The Ahmadiyya School* (Kuwait City: Al-Asriya Press, 2016) (in Arabic).

53 Ibid., p. 42; Saif Marzouq al-Shamlan, *On the History of Kuwait*, 2nd ed. (Kuwait City: That Al Salasil Publications, 1986) (in Arabic), p. 202.

for non-Arabs to preserve their Persian identity and language, fearing that English culture would come to dominate in Bahrain as a result of colonial policies.[54]

Nevertheless, the social, economic, and cultural transformations witnessed by the region in recent decades, particularly the aforementioned wave of immigration, have cast the relationship between language and identity in a different light. In the context of globalization, multiculturalism, and the increasing international presence in Gulf societies, Arabic has come to play a significant role in shaping contemporary national narratives and in highlighting the cultural distinctiveness of these countries in both regional and international spheres. This is evident in major cultural initiatives and projects, such as national museums, cultural festivals, and intellectual initiatives, which seek to employ Arabic as a central element in building cultural identity and enhancing the civilizational standing of these countries.

All of this has compelled the Gulf states to strengthen the status of Arabic as the national language of these countries and their citizenries. This has manifested itself in a series of laws aiming to protect Arabic within the context of the linguistic pluralism described above,[55] as well as to enhance the status of Arabic in the public sphere, such as in the names of streets, institutions, shops, and the virtual space – even though this often relies on local dialects and popular heritage.[56]

Here, it is important to note that the Arabic enshrined by institutions and legislation is the Modern Standard Arabic disseminated by Arab media and publishing, and not the Arabic used in Gulf societies before the oil era, as preserved in Gulf records and documents, which was interspersed with expressions, words, and structures borrowed from local dialects, ancient languages, and foreign languages introduced to these societies.

Together, the GCC countries have enacted some 574 laws related to language (161 in Saudi Arabia; 147 in Qatar; 116 in the UAE; 61 in Oman; 48 in Kuwait; and 41 in Bahrain). These laws address the connection between language and various areas, including economics, law, education, administration, and so on. Collectively, they represent a third of all such laws in the Arab world.[57] Some academics involved in language policy management consider multilingualism in Gulf societies an opportunity to strengthen the position of Arabic.[58]

54 Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, *One Hundred Years of Formal Education in Bahrain* (Manama: Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Bahrain, 1999) (in Arabic), p. 115.

55 Among the most prominent such laws are those that oblige government agencies, public institutions, and state-owned companies to use the Arabic language in their correspondence and transactions, such as Saudi Royal Decree No. (3/H/15351) of May 1980; Qatar's Law No. (7) of 2019 concerning the protection of the Arabic language; and the document "Conditions for the Mandatory Use of the Arabic Language" issued by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers in Oman in June 2025. In the same vein, the UAE launched the "Arabic Language Charter" in 2012, to be a reference for all its policies and laws related to protecting and promoting the Arabic language.

56 The study *The Linguistic Reality of Arabic in the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council States* lays out the laws passed by the Gulf states in this regard. See, for the UAE, pp. 58-62; Bahrain, pp. 105-109; Saudi Arabia, pp. 156-165; Oman, pp. 209-214; Qatar, pp. 264-267; and Kuwait, pp. 310 - 313.

57 See the language policy data system for Arab States prepared by the King Salman Global Academy for the Arabic Language in: Ibid., p. 324.

58 Ibid., p. 64.

On the other hand, this situation has compelled Gulf states simultaneously to manage the status of other languages spoken by large, established communities. This is perhaps unique to the Gulf countries, as they are home to entire linguistic communities within their borders, creating, under state regulation, spaces where these languages can flourish – including media outlets, public gatherings, etc.

2. Arabic in Gulf Societies Facing the Challenge of English and its Sociological Consequences

In addition to the two aforementioned challenges – the connection between language and identity, with its centrality in the project of Gulf state-building, and the linguistic pluralism of Gulf societies with their large, multi-ethnic and multilingual migrant populations – the third linguistic challenge facing Gulf societies is the dominance of English. This is a global challenge, not limited to Gulf societies, but it takes on a special significance in these societies, where English has become the *lingua franca,* allowing citizens, who speak their mother tongue of Arabic yet represent a minority of the population, to converse with immigrants who constitute the majority of residents, and speak dozens of languages.

The dialect used here is not standard English, but rather a simplified form, containing many grammatical, morphological, and phonetic variations. Yet it forms a rudimentary foundation for communication. While English has played a significant role in this regard, its overwhelming presence in society has put pressure on the native languages of citizens, as well as on Arab immigrants in Gulf societies. This is on top of the pressures of policies aimed at protecting the Arabic language, alongside its relationship to the issue of national identity.

However, English also exerts pressure in a manner unrelated to its status within Gulf societies. It has become the language of science and knowledge around the world, and an essential tool for meeting the demands of development. Some researchers argue that this is reinforced by the neoliberal tendencies adopted by the Gulf states.[59] Accordingly, these states have taken several steps to strengthen the position of English at educational institutions, reflecting a utilitarian view of English. For example, some Gulf states (such as Bahrain) have made it a compulsory foreign language at all levels of education.[60] However, as in other parts of the world, this has often led to conflict and tension between the local language and English as the universal language of knowledge, which has in turn transformed into a quasi-ideological struggle. This is particularly pronounced in Gulf societies, where

59 Osman Z. Barnawi, *Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018).

60 *The Linguistic Reality of Arabic in the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council States*, p. 69.

Arabic holds a special significance linked to identity and the privilege of native citizenship in multi-ethnic communities, as discussed above.[61]

One of the most striking examples of this tension was the "Education for a New Era" project, launched by the State of Qatar in 2002 in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, with the aim of reforming and developing its education system. As part of the project, English was to replace Arabic as the language of instruction for science, technology and mathematics. However, the result was confusion, due to the project's top-down implementation, which excluded stakeholders from the decision-making process, along with inadequate planning and preparation for the transition, insufficient teacher training and proficiency in English, and students' weak English skills, which hindered their understanding of scientific content. Further challenges included institutional and logistical issues such as a lack of textbooks and increased workloads for teachers, declining student performance on national tests, and socio-cultural resistance arising from fears that Arabic would be marginalized and the country's cultural and linguistic identity threatened. This led to the project being abandoned in 2012.[62]

In addition to this global dimension, proficiency in English is a prerequisite for employment and career advancement in much of the globalized economy, particularly in multinational corporations and the private sector. Meanwhile, Arabic is often associated with government administration and state-related sectors. This functional distribution of languages leads to a kind of linguistic hierarchy that may be reflected in job opportunities and professional privileges, and may also contribute to shaping some patterns of social inequality between citizens and residents, or between different groups within the labour market.

The reality is that such a linguistic landscape, with the implicit disparities and hierarchies it engenders in education and career pathways – dynamics linked to the social, administrative, and political status of Arabic and English – creates parallel worlds, leaving little potential for social integration between them. In short, language in Gulf societies is no longer merely a construct of culture or identity, but rather a factor in the redistribution of opportunities and privileges, and in shaping individuals' positions within the social and economic structure. We believe this warrants sociological and sociolinguistic examination to construct an analytical framework for understanding Gulf societies, one that connects education, the labour market, legislation, and the public sphere.

With the rapid technological transformations of the last two decades, new challenges and opportunities have also emerged concerning the status of the Arabic language in the digital realm. Digital platforms, social media, and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based applications have become

61 Sara Hillman, "'I'm a Heritage Speaker of the Damascene Dialect of Arabic': Negotiating the Identity Label of Arabic Heritage Language Learner," *Heritage Language Journal*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2019), pp. 296-317; Sarah Hopkyns, *The Impact of Global English on Cultural Identities in the United Arab Emirates: Wanted not Welcome* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020); Sara Hillman, "Language Policies and Ideologies in Qatar: Is Resistance to English-Medium Instruction the Right Resistance?," in: Mark Wyatt & Glenda El Gamal (eds.), *English as a Medium of Instruction on the Arabian Peninsula* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2023).

62 Eiman Mustafawi & Kassim Shaaban, "Language Policies in Education in Qatar between 2003 and 2012: From Local to Global then Back to Local," *Language Policy*, no. 18 (2019), pp. 209 - 242.

particularly prominent environments for shaping contemporary linguistic usage. In this context, the presence of Arabic in digital content, in Natural Language Processing (NLP) applications, and in technical policies of Arabization, raises new questions about the future of Arabic in knowledge and communication. The digital space has also given rise to hybrid linguistic patterns that combine Modern Standard Arabic, local dialects, and foreign languages.

With all this in mind, and given the centrality of the language issue in the Gulf countries, the resulting language policies, and the research agenda of ACRPS – of which the Doha Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language was a central component – we decided to dedicate the second track of the 13th round of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum to the topic of "Language Policies in the Arab Gulf Countries". In doing so, A CRPS seeks to build upon the significant efforts already made in this field, including studies and academic conferences that have addressed the topic. In other words, through this Forum, ACRPS aims to resume the critical examination of language policies in the Arab Gulf states, understanding their content, orientations, procedures, and mechanisms, as well as the institutions and legislation they have produced, alongside the political, cultural, linguistic, sociological, state, and economic contexts that have shaped and produced language policies of this nature. The research themes we propose here are based on all these elements.

3. Proposed Themes

- The Arabic language in the Gulf and its development: A historical perspective.
- Language-related legislation in the Gulf states.
- Policies for managing the status of foreign languages in the Gulf states.
- The status of foreign languages that coexisted in Gulf societies before the oil era, their place in the Gulf states' current linguistic landscape, and the extent to which contemporary language policies have paid attention to them.
- How do language policies address local Arabic dialects and the ancient languages of the Arabian Peninsula (Shehri, ancient Himyaritic, and their related languages in southern Oman, ancient Yemen, and southern Saudi Arabia)?
- What fate will the region's ancient languages face? How do state and society deal with them? What policies and mechanisms exist for preserving, studying, and deepening knowledge of them?
- How to address the dominance of English in the Gulf countries.
- Gulf policies related to the language of instruction.
- Centres for the protection of the Arabic language in Gulf societies.
- The Arabic language and the digital transition.
- The Arabic language in the Gulf labour market.

- Language in Gulf societies as a social and economic resource that contributes to the distribution of value and opportunities within society.
- The Arabic language and dialects in the Gulf.
- The linguistic landscape in the Gulf countries and the production of social inequalities.
- Language policies and patterns of social inequality, particularly in Gulf societies characterized by intense multilingualism and a highly differentiated labour market.
- The Arabic language, identity, migration, and multiculturalism.
- The status of the Arabic language in Gulf media and culture.
- The Gulf state and the regulation of the linguistic sphere.

Forum Participation Guidelines

- The Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum invites university lecturers and professors, researchers from the GCC countries, and other specialists to participate in the Forum by submitting research papers on either of the two themes outlined above.
- The Academic Committee welcomes abstracts of approximately 350 words describing proposed research papers, including the research question, a brief literature review, the main hypothesis or thesis, the methodology, and the primary references and sources, by Saturday, 16 May 2026.

The abstract must be submitted along with an up-to-date CV and a high-quality photograph, after creating a user account on the ACRPS Researchers' System at the following link: https://researchers.dohainstitute.org/researchersen/pages/default.aspx

For more information, please refer to this user's guide.

- The Academic Committee will inform researchers who have submitted abstracts as to whether their proposals have been accepted or rejected, no later than Thursday, 4 June 2026.
- After approving proposals, the Academic Committee expects to receive full research papers (5,000-7,000 words, including footnotes and references) through the same portal. These papers must adhere to ACRPS research and formatting standards, and will be sent for peer review. The deadline for submission is Saturday, 12 September 2026.
- The Academic Committee's approval of an abstract does not automatically guarantee acceptance of the research paper for presentation at the Forum. It must first be approved as a complete draft. The Committee will notify the researcher of its decision.
- ACRPS will cover travel and accommodation expenses, but will not provide any compensation for research presented at the Forum. All research papers become the intellectual property of ACRPS.

- Researchers may write their papers in Arabic or English.
- The Forum's proceedings will be published in an Arabic-language book issued by ACRPS.

For inquiries, please contact us at: gulf.forum@dohainstitute.edu.qa

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