Middle East Council
on Global Affairs

Issue Brief
July 2026

Lessons Learned by GCC States in the 2026 US-Israel-Iran War

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KEYWORDS
GCC, Iran, Security, Deterrence, Connectivity



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(Photo by Stefan Jeremiah / POOL / AFP) September 24, 2025.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Security Cannot Be Subcontracted:

The 2026 war demonstrated that when American and Gulf interests diverged, American interests prevailed. Gulf security, therefore, requires indigenous defense capability, built through joint-venture models and partnership pluralism rather than reliance on a single external guarantor. The U.S. relationship remains valuable, but only as one of several pillars.

Neither Normalization nor Restraint Deter on Its Own:

Iran targeted all six GCC states despite years of rapprochement, normalization, and wartime restraint, reading Gulf moderation as inability rather than choice. Normalization and deterrence operate on different timescales and serve different functions; they must be paired through credible deterrence floors, standing communication channels, and demonstrated capabilities. Restraint without visible escalation options invites, rather than prevents, aggression.

Intra-GCC Divergence is Now a Strategic Liability:

Iran calibrated its strikes to fragment the GCC states' response, where six states fought six separate battles while the Council's collective defense institutions went unused. Closing this gap requires a shared strategic doctrine, crisis-period authority for the Secretariat, and systematic intelligence sharing.

Bolstering Regional Connectivity is a Strategic Necessity:

The closure of Hormuz exposed a structural gap in infrastructure, with non-Hormuz pipeline capacity far short of Hormuz transit volumes and no region-wide contingency plan. Resilience is the product of redundancy, and constraint is not capital but political will. The sixty-day window is the moment to convert sovereign wealth into strategic infrastructure decisions.

On 17 June 2026, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran digitally signed the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which consists of a 14-point framework aimed at ending the war that erupted on 28 February 2026. This framework outlines a comprehensive peace agreement to be negotiated within 60 days of the MoU, with the possibility of extending this period by mutual consent of the parties involved.[1]

The Memorandum was mediated by Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif with critical support from Qatar, which leveraged its standing channels to both Washington and Tehran to host preparatory rounds in Doha, relay positions between the parties during the most sensitive phases and help bridge the final gaps between the involved parties.[2] The MoU was interpreted in various and sometimes conflicting ways by all parties involved. While some regarded it as a significant victory for Iran, others saw it as a humiliating defeat. These differing interpretations were not limited to the opposing camps but also existed within each group.[3] Regardless of the different readings of the MoU, the most important point remains that it creates a sixty-day negotiating window for a final agreement endorsed by the United Nations Security Council.[4]

This issue brief argues that the memorandum is an interim framework; its significance lies less in its fourteen points than in the sixty-day negotiating window it opens, during which the terms of a final UN-endorsed settlement will be discussed and shaped. The memorandum addresses Washington’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and Tehran’s concerns about regime survival and sanctions and aims to resolve the global oil market’s need for an open Strait of Hormuz. The Gulf's central wartime exposures and structural vulnerabilities, however, fall outside the memorandum's scope and therefore remain unaddressed. Civilian infrastructure became a target; the US security umbrella proved neither credible nor efficient; intra-GCC divergence was exploited by Iran; and the Gulf energy and economic systems lacked viable alternatives when the Strait of Hormuz was closed. As the MoU cannot be expected to resolve these issues, the sixty-day window is the period during which the GCC states must include them in the final settlement. This issue brief aims to highlight lessons learned by the GCC states and argues that GCC interests should be taken into account during the 60-day negotiation period.

What Did the War Cost the GCC?

Within a few hours of the first Israeli–American strikes, which killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and senior Iranian leaders, all six Gulf states came under sustained Iranian missile and drone attacks.[5] Before the conditional ceasefire of 8 April, Iran had launched thousands of missiles and drones against countries across the region, including around 6,400 missiles and drones against GCC states and Jordan, which constituted over 80 percent of all Iranian attacks on other states, including Israel.[6] Across the GCC, at least twenty-eight people lost their lives.[7]

Iranian strikes devastated major sectors across the GCC states, including energy infrastructure, transportation hubs, industrial facilities, and military installations.[8] The economic toll for the GCC states was unprecedented. The Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly twenty percent of global oil and an equivalent share of LNG flowed, was effectively closed.[9] Qatar Energy halted LNG production on 2 March and declared force majeure two days later. Kuwait Petroleum

Corporation declared force majeure in March, extended it in late April, and announced it would be unable to meet contractual obligations even after the strait reopened.[10] Tanker movements through the strait collapsed from thirty-seven tankers per day before the war to almost zero by 8 March.[11]

Lesson One: Security Cannot be Subcontracted

The strongest lesson of the 2026 war, and the one that should anchor everything that follows, is that Gulf security cannot be outsourced. For more than three decades, GCC capitals have organized their strategic planning around bilateral defense relationships with the United States: Central Command's forward headquarters at Al Udeid; the Fifth Fleet at Manama; basing rights at Al-Dhafra, Doha, Kuwait City, Manama, and along the Saudi coast; foreign defense sales running into hundreds of billions of dollars; and an implicit understanding that the weight of Gulf financial, energy, and political importance to American strategy made the Peninsula a protected area.

> **When American interests and Gulf interests diverged in a crisis, the American interests prevailed.**

The war revealed the limits of this premise in the only way that ultimately mattered. When American interests and Gulf interests diverged in a crisis, the American interests prevailed. Gulf capitals had warned for months against a strike on Iran. Oman's foreign minister had publicly declared diplomatic progress on the nuclear file twenty-four hours before the Israeli American strikes.[12] Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait had all communicated their preference for diplomatic resolution.[13]

The Islamabad MoU reinforces this lesson. It addresses Iran's nuclear stockpile, sanctions relief for Tehran, the global oil market's need for an open strait, and Israel's actions in Lebanon. It does not address the GCC states' exposure to a potential future round. There is no provision in its 14 points that guarantees any Iranian commitments not to target civilian infrastructure in the GCC states, no acknowledgment of the casualties across the GCC states,[14] and no clear representation for GCC states in the Hormuz reopening framework. Article 5 of the memorandum refers to Oman, but not as a party of equal standing to Iran, nor as a representative of the GCC. The MoU is what Washington and Tehran agreed they could agree on. Three lessons follow from this record.

First, the war showed the cost of depending on others for defense. Relying on systems controlled or supplied by foreign partners meant that protection came late, partially, or not at all. Accordingly, building indigenous capability in air and missile defense, drone detection and cyber resilience is now a proven necessity, which can be achieved through joint ventures and partnerships.

Second, the war revealed that the GCC states' collective defense institutions were not ready for a real crisis. The Joint Defense Council, the Peninsula Shield Force, and the Vision for Regional Security were all in place when the war began, yet none played a meaningful role. Each of the six states fought its own battle against a single coordinated adversary. There was no shared early warning, no pooled stock of interceptors, and no way to make a collective decision in real time without the consent of

all six capitals. The lesson is that these institutions should be operational under fire. That means shared early warning, common stockpiles, joint training, rules of engagement agreed in advance, and a standing coordination cell with real authority during a crisis.

Third, the war showed the limits of relying on a single security patron. The war has accelerated arguments for deeper defense and security cooperation with other nations in carefully calibrated ways.[15] Gulf sovereign autonomy is best protected by partnership pluralism rather than partnership substitution, and it should be fully utilized in the interests of the GCC states.

Lesson Two: Neutrality Without Deterrence is Not Protection

The GCC states spent years building a doctrine of active neutrality in U.S.–Iran tensions. Saudi Arabia restored full diplomatic relations with Iran in March 2023 under Chinese mediation, ending a seven-year rupture and establishing reciprocal embassies.[16] The United Arab Emirates restored ties in 2022 after a similar period of diplomatic absence. Qatar maintained channels to Tehran throughout the period of regional rapprochement, and Oman's role as a mediator between Washington and Tehran was a consistent feature of various negotiations over the past decade. Even Bahrain and Kuwait, both maintaining stricter postures, had reduced their threat rhetoric.

None of these restraints are translated into protection or security guarantees. Despite objecting to this war, expending diplomatic effort to prevent it, and not being party to it or involved in it, Iran chose to target all six GCC states at the beginning of the war. Iran framed its assaults as retaliation for alleged Gulf complicity, but offered no credible evidence of such complicity, and the Gulf states convincingly denied that their territories were used for offensive sorties.[17]

> **The lesson is that normalization operates on a different scale and serves different functions than deterrence. The two must be paired, not substituted for each other.**

The lesson is that normalization operates on a different scale and serves different functions than deterrence. The two must be paired, not substituted for each other. This pairing has three components: credible deterrence floors, understood by Tehran in advance, on the consequences of striking Gulf territory or protected categories of civilian infrastructure; a standing, verified GCC–Iran communication channel to prevent misperception and misinterpretation in a fast-moving crisis; and a Gulf-led governance arrangement for the Strait of Hormuz. The MoU's silence on civilian infrastructure norms is the gap the GCC states must close in the next sixty days.

Lesson Three: Restraint Requires a Strategy

Throughout the war, the Gulf states exercised significant strategic restraint. They denied the use of their territory and airspace for offensive operations against Iran. They refused to retaliate militarily even after suffering direct strikes. They maintained mediation channels through Doha and Muscat, as well as bilateral contacts with Tehran. They kept oil and gas production flowing wherever they

could, absorbing economic costs rather than imposing them. They issued joint statements at the UN Security Council. Despite considerable provocation, the GCC states did not demand an expansion of the war.

Restraint was arguably the most viable option available to Gulf decision makers. The capability gap with Iran was wide; the consequences of escalation could have included strikes on desalination plants across the Peninsula, which would have rendered Gulf cities uninhabitable within weeks;[18] and the political risks of being seen to align with American or Israeli war aims in a region still reeling from the Gaza war since October 2023 were substantial. But restraint alone is not a strategy; rather, it is a posture that can be sustained only when paired with credible escalation options.[19]

Additionally, for restraint to be part of a strategy, adversaries must understand that the Gulf is choosing not to escalate, and not that it is unable to do so. In this war, Gulf restraint was sometimes read as weakness rather than a calculated choice. The lesson is that, in future crises, such restraint must be accompanied by clear deterrence signals.

Defensive capability becomes a signal when the adversary knows the Gulf can absorb a first strike and still choose its response. This option also needs red lines backed by defensive depth such as layered air and missile defense, indigenously operated and, over time, Gulf-produced, paired with hardened critical infrastructure and pre-positioned continuity plans, communicated to Tehran as the floor beneath which restraint does not extend.

Although the GCC states are not a match for Iran when it comes to Iran's conventional ballistic missile capability, credible Gulf options in adjacent domains exist to establish that strikes on GCC states would impose proportional costs. These include the advanced combat aerial capabilities of the GCC states, offensive cyber capabilities, armed drones and loitering munitions, economic and financial leverage over Iran's trade and remittance channels, and coordinated information operations, among others. These need to be operational and physically available rather than theoretical.

Moreover, the narrative matters as much as the perception and defense readiness. During the war, Tehran freely claimed the GCC states' complicity in the initial attacks against it on 28 February 2026 without evidence and used that claim to justify its aggression against them, including the targeting of civilian and economic infrastructure, further undermining the GCC states' position. In fact, Iran launched a disinformation warfare against the GCC states to justify its aggression and garner public support both in the region and beyond, as well as to win the war of hearts and minds. But a unified and coordinated information warfare strategy by GCC states stripped Iran of its excuses and thus its legitimacy, positioning the GCC well to act defensively or offensively.

Lesson Four: Divergence is now Strategically Expensive

The war's most uncomfortable lesson concerns the GCC itself. The GCC issued statements; it did not act collectively. Approaching the situation as six distinct states led to different operational stances when under fire. Some of this divergence reflects legitimate differences in geography,

demography, threat perception, and bilateral history. But the war demonstrated that adversaries can, and will, exploit these divergences. Iran's calibrated targeting against the GCC states was arguably designed to fragment the Gulf response.[20]

The Council's institutional architecture exists to prevent such an unfavorable outcome. The Joint Defense Council, the Peninsula Shield Force, the Vision for Regional Security, and the GCC Secretariat all provide platforms for coordinated action. None functioned as it was supposed to during the war. The post-war agenda must accordingly address three deficits:

> **The GCC needs a shared strategic doctrine that reconciles divergent national interests within a common framework, with honest treatment of divergence and disagreements rather than concealment in summit communiques.**

First, the need for a doctrine. The GCC needs a shared strategic doctrine that reconciles divergent national interests within a common framework, with honest treatment of divergence and disagreements rather than concealment in summit communiques. Second, the need for institutional authority. The GCC Secretariat needs explicit crisis-period authority that does not require unanimous real-time consent. Third, the need for intelligence sharing. Iran's success in exploiting Gulf divergences rested in part on its access to information that the Gulf states were not systematically sharing with one another. A standing GCC intelligence fusion cell, with secure communications and clear sharing protocols, will address this issue.

Lesson Five: Bolstering Regional Connectivity is a Strategic Necessity

For years, the idea that Iran might close the Strait of Hormuz or significantly disrupt freedom of navigation through it has been widely discussed. The discussions even extended to disruptions by other means following the famous six-day incident in the Suez Canal in March 2021, when the 400-meter container ship "Ever Given" ran aground and wedged across the waterway, blocking all traffic and disrupting around 10 percent of global seaborne trade.[21]

The threat of closing critical chokepoints increased following the Houthi attacks on targets in the Red Sea after Israel's 2023 war on Gaza.[22] While some GCC states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had options to avoid the Strait of Hormuz, none of these events prompted the GCC states to develop emergency plans or alternatives to completely circumvent the strait during times of restrictions or emergencies. Even the measures taken by Saudi Arabia and the UAE proved insufficient, given that they accounted only for a part of their total oil output. There are three reasons that could explain this situation. First, the GCC states may have believed that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz was a distant scenario unlikely to materialize, leading them to conclude that no action was necessary. Alternatively, they might have thought that the U.S. would not allow such a scenario to occur and, if it did, would respond swiftly with maximum force to resolve it. Finally, they may have considered that any alternatives would likely incur significantly higher costs than a temporary restriction on the strait, thus deeming investment in alternatives unnecessary.

Countries like Qatar and Kuwait, in particular, are heavily reliant on the strait for their energy exports. In Qatar's case, this dependence is existential. Qatar produces approximately 77 million tons per annum of liquefied natural gas at Ras Laffan Industrial City on its north-eastern coast, the world's largest LNG production facility and the source of approximately 20 percent of global LNG trade.[23]

Ninety-three percent of Qatar's LNG exports transit through the Strait of Hormuz,[24] with no pipeline alternative and a limited overland bypass. The Dolphin pipeline, which supplies approximately 20.5 billion cubic meters annually to the United Arab Emirates and Oman, has limited spare capacity. Oman's LNG export terminals were operating at near-full capacity before the war. When Qatar Energy halted LNG production on 2 March 2026 and declared force majeure two days later, there was no operational redundancy to absorb the shock. Qatar's LNG exports to Asian buyers such as Japan, South Korea, China, and India simply stopped.[25]

> **Maritime alternatives beyond Hormuz must be reviewed against a permanent assumption that the strait can close on hours' notice.**

Kuwait's exposure was different in shape but equally severe. Pre-war crude exports stood at approximately two million barrels per day, every barrel routed through Hormuz, with no pipeline alternative.[26] Kuwait Petroleum Corporation declared force majeure in March and extended it on 20 April, acknowledging that even when the strait reopened the country would be unable to meet contractual obligations, a recognition that Kuwait's production base had itself been damaged. Kuwait additionally depends on imported LNG from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, totaling approximately 7 billion cubic meters in 2025, also routed through the Strait of Hormuz. The country thus faced simultaneous export and import shocks during the war.

Maritime alternatives beyond Hormuz must be reviewed against a permanent assumption that the strait can close on hours' notice. The Saudi East-West Petroline carries up to seven million barrels per day to Yanbu, though loading terminal capacity at Yanbu was never designed for this volume and Iran demonstrated during the war that the pipeline itself is targetable.[27] The UAE's Habshan–Fujairah pipeline carries 1.8 million barrels per day to the Gulf of Oman, with limited spare capacity given its routine use.[28] The Iraq pipeline to Turkiye, with a theoretical capacity of 1.6 million barrels per day, is being progressively reactivated.[29] Combined non-Hormuz pipeline capacity across the region at 3.5 to 5.5 million barrels per day remains far short of the 20 million barrels per day that previously transited the strait. In this sense, the infrastructure gap is structural.

Closing that gap is not the work of a single summit or quarter. It will require a decade of capital allocation, regional diplomacy, and political coordination. A contingency plan is the recognition that resilience is the product of redundancy, and systems with inherent weaknesses will eventually fail. The Gulf states have accumulated sovereign wealth holdings of an estimated 4.9 trillion dollars. The constraint is not money; it is political will to convert long-term financial assets into long-term strategic infrastructure.

Conclusion

The Islamabad MoU opens a sixty-day window to negotiate a final agreement endorsed by the UN Security Council. The Gulf has five concrete tasks in this window:

First, the GCC states should ensure their interests are secured in any potential comprehensive U.S.-Iran agreement within the 60-day period. Second, a GCC-led initiative by Oman on Strait of Hormuz governance involving GCC states, Iran, Iraq, and major maritime stakeholders, anchored by Gulf naval participation. Third, a GCC summit-level commitment to discuss lessons learned and required follow-up measures, address emerging gaps and vulnerabilities during the war, and prepare for the potential renewal of war within 60 days or in the future.

Measures could include, for example, integrated air and missile defense with shared early warning, common interceptor stockpiles, and joint procurement, building on the Vision for Regional Security.

Fourth, accelerated investments in economic diversification such as Qatar's non-Hormuz LNG portfolio, Kuwait's pipeline alternatives and strategic reserves, sovereign Gulf war-risk insurance capacity, partnership diversifications, and technology diversification across critical digital infrastructure.

Fifth, a strategic doctrine review at the GCC level reconciling diverse national threat perceptions within a common framework, with explicit crisis-period authority for the GCC Secretariat, a standing intelligence fusion cell, and structured mechanisms for managing disagreements.

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