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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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## ***Neutral for now: Persian Gulf states' gamble in the Iran-Israel showdown***

With Iran's vow to retaliate against Israel, Persian Gulf states face a delicate balancing act—caught between asserting autonomy and increasing dependence on US security, all while the Resistance Axis enjoys unprecedented popularity in the region.

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The signs of an impending Iranian response to Israel's airstrike on Iranian military interests last month are becoming clearer. Official statements from Tehran suggest a military retaliation is inevitable and could occur before the US elections on 9 November - with some reports indicating it may be launched from Iraqi territory to curb the cycle of back-and-forth escalations that began on 1 April following Tel Aviv's targeting of the Iranian consulate in Damascus.

Both sides are seeking to establish a new deterrence balance, albeit with very different aims. Iran, whose sovereignty has been repeatedly violated, warns of the danger posed by Israel's expansionist ambitions in the region, while Israel, as the aggressor, seems intent on dragging the entire region into chaos, banking on unwavering US support.

Two distinct camps have emerged: on one side, the Israeli-US alliance and its supporters, and on the other, the countries of the Resistance Axis, which have launched the "battle of unity" in support of Gaza. Caught between these factions is a third group, one that seeks neutrality, unwilling to pick a side for fear of compromising its own interests.

The US is struggling to maintain influence, while Israel is playing what may be its final card. The question remains: where do the Persian Gulf states stand?

## **Airspace restrictions and Gulf diplomacy**

The Persian Gulf states have unanimously condemned Israel's ۲۶ October strikes on Iranian sites, which came in response to Tehran's own retaliatory missile attacks earlier last month following high-profile assassinations of resistance leaders carried out by the occupation state.

Statements from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, and Oman condemned these strikes as violations of Iranian sovereignty, escalating tensions in an already volatile West Asia.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have taken a firm stance, refusing to allow Israel to use their airspace to launch further strikes against Iran, a position echoed by Jordan, which was prompted to officially deny it had allowed Israel to use its airspace to attack the Islamic Republic.

This reassured Tehran, which had threatened a forceful response against any country that facilitated Israeli attacks. These diplomatic messages coincided with Iran opening new channels of dialogue, including President Masoud Pezeshkian's meeting with GCC officials, followed by Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi's diplomatic tour that included Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkiye.

Despite Amman's claim that its airspace was not used in the recent attack, videos have emerged documenting Israeli fighter jets over Jordanian skies. Similarly, Saudi Arabia claimed its airspace was not used during the strikes, raising questions about how Israeli planes refueled over such long distances. Israel subsequently admitted to using refueling aircraft to bypass Persian Gulf airspace restrictions.

Speaking to *The Cradle*, Lebanese military analyst Omar Maarabouni contends that "In principle, and based on and in connection with the recent Israeli attack, a group of Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, stated that they prevented the Israelis from passing through their airspace, and this is something that Iranian radar can confirm or deny, and indeed the official Iranian statement confirms that these aircraft did not pass through Gulf airspace."

Maarabouni adds that agreements between the US and Persian Gulf states are defensive in nature, allowing these states to prevent US bases from being used offensively against Iran, especially since improved relations with Iran are now in their interest. Regarding alternative Israeli plans, Maarabouni says:

**"It is quite clear that Israeli planes took the path associated with Syria and then Iraq towards Iran, and therefore we are talking about a distance of ۲,۰۰۰ km back and**

**forth, and this is what Israel was keen to avoid over the issue of refueling, as F-35 and F-16 aircraft can travel distances exceeding 2,200 km without the need to refuel."**

Jordan, he says, meanwhile, finds itself in an awkward position, having claimed that Iranian missiles breached its sovereignty, despite such missiles traveling at altitudes beyond the limits recognized under international airspace law. As Maarabouni points out:

**"The one who violated Jordanian sovereignty is Israel, which fired air defense missiles into Jordanian airspace to intercept Iranian missiles, but it is unclear why Jordan has adopted the responsibility of blaming the violation of its sovereignty on both Iran and Israel."**

### **Oil on the frontline**

Persian Gulf states are wary of being dragged into the escalating conflict, especially as they attempt to close the chapter on their failing Yemen war, which backfired horribly following devastating attacks on Saudi Arabia's prized Aramco facilities in 2019.

These strikes exposed the vulnerability of the "oil for protection" security framework under US patronage. In their recent overtures to Iran, GCC states also urged Washington to pressure Israel against targeting Iranian oil infrastructure, warning of disastrous consequences for global energy markets.

Sources in the Persian Gulf, speaking on condition of anonymity, inform *The Cradle* that while the Gulf states were aware of the timing of Israel's attack, they were ready to mediate with the US if the situation escalated.

Following the attack's failure, these states rushed to issue condemnatory statements, emphasizing their unwillingness to be drawn into direct hostilities against Tehran, despite their quiet acceptance - and even encouragement - of actions that might undermine Iranian influence or its nuclear ambitions. The Persian Gulf monarchies are eager to shield themselves from any backlash amid rising global anger over the atrocities in Gaza and Lebanon, which have put normalization efforts with Israel on hold.

### **US intervention: A double-edged sword**

The White House has warned Iran against retaliating to Israeli strikes, stating that the US would support Israel if attacked and floating the notion that Washington "can't restrain" Tel Aviv in the event of further attacks from Iran.

Former hawkish US national security advisor John Bolton boasted that Israel would use Persian Gulf airspace if needed, and that "these governments may complain about this, but frankly, they see Iran as a strategic threat because of its nuclear program, as well as Iran's

old support for terrorists, not only Hezbollah and Hamas, but the Houthis and Shia militias in Iraq."

The Persian Gulf states now find themselves caught between their desire for autonomy and their dependency on US security guarantees—particularly in light of the numerous US bases spread across their territories, which primarily serve to protect Washington's regional interests.

Agreements between the US and Persian Gulf states grant American forces access to airspace, ports, and military bases in these countries, providing logistical support for regional operations. While Gulf states have formally rejected offensive US operations from their territories, they still allow defensive activities.

Qatar, the only official non-NATO ally of the US, hosts the largest concentration of US forces at Al-Udeid and Al-Sailiya bases. Kuwait ranks second in terms of the quantity and quality of US assets located at four bases: Camp Doha, Arifjan, Ali al-Salem, and Buehring.

The UAE has three US bases, Al-Dhafra, Fujairah, and Jebel Ali Port, all of which provide logistical support services. As for the US facilities in Saudi Arabia, they are Eskan Village and Prince Sultan Air Base, which offer the provision of air and missile defense systems and the use of military aircraft. Bahrain hosts three bases: Juffair, Sheikh Isa, and Muharraq, and Oman hosts a similar number: Al-Masna, Thumrait, and Masira.

All of these countries fall under the domain of US Central Command (CENTCOM), which works to "counter the Iranian threat."

Last year's Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has reignited the debate over Persian Gulf security dependence on Washington. Experts argue that the current escalation between Iran and Israel will force Gulf states to find a balance between their diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran on the one hand, and their commitment to a US-led regional security alliance on the other.

The US has sought to reassure Persian Gulf leaders, offering assistance in defending against any potential Iranian aggression. To back up its words, the US approved a \$4.5 billion sale of TOW missiles to Riyadh and authorized the sale of over \$7 billion in weapons and ammunition to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

### **Balancing public condemnation with covert cooperation**

Investigative journalist Bob Woodward's new book War, which sheds light on recent GCC–Israeli dynamics, reveals that regional rulers, including those of the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, unanimously agree - in private - on the need to eliminate Hamas,

while working quietly to minimize public backlash over their covert cooperation with Israel.

After last October's Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Persian Gulf states condemned the attack but later launched diplomatic efforts to prevent regional tensions from escalating further. Notably, these developments have disrupted key projects, including normalization with Israel and economic diversification plans, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

Iranian journalist Mohammad Gharavi tells *The Cradle* that the events of 7 October 2023 strained what had been positive Saudi-Iranian relations:

**"The Iranians believed that a positive relationship would have a positive impact in terms of supporting the Palestinian cause, but the Saudi position was neutral despite the historical opportunity that could have been invested at home and in the Islamic environment. Unfortunately, the Palestinian issue is the prominent point of contention with the GCC, which is why we are sending messages that the opportunity is ripe to change this course."**

He describes Saudi–Iranian relations as having made significant advancements in terms of coordination and cooperation since the two neighboring states struck a rapprochement deal in Beijing last year:

**"Iran's reassuring messages, as well as warnings not to go too far in cooperating with the Americans and Israelis to antagonize Iran or using air, land and sea spaces to direct hostile action against it, were influential and positive and can be built upon in the coming stage, as it reflects the determination of the two countries to put aside differences in the interest of the security of the two countries and protect the strategic alliance with China and others for what it holds of economic dimensions."**

Ultimately, the Persian Gulf states remain neutral – for now. Their future course, however, will depend on visible and tangible US assurances. If such guarantees are secured, the Gulf may be willing to align more openly against Iran, given that their interests clash with those of the Resistance Axis, which promotes regional independence and self-determination – ideas that resonate with the Arab masses throughout West Asia.

NOV 4, 2023