

Strategic Foresight Assessment: The US–Israeli War Against Iran and Its Implications for the Gulf States

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Executive Summary

If a war consists of several battles, then the initiation or termination of battles and military initiatives is in the hands of the United States; bringing the war itself to an end, however, will be in Iran's hands if it makes substantive concessions.

If no agreement or settlement is reached, the central question will no longer be whether war will break out, but whether the existing war will escalate into another major military campaign and potentially a broader regional conflict. The United States and Israel began military operations against Iran on 28 February 2026. The April ceasefire and subsequent diplomatic arrangements did not establish lasting peace. By October, the confrontation had developed into a combination of intermittent attacks, a naval blockade, economic pressure, regional proxy warfare, and negotiations. The US Congressional Research Service describes the conflict as a war of attrition in which neither side has achieved all of its objectives at an acceptable cost.

I. Introduction

Several developments are particularly important in the US–Iranian conflict:

1. Continuation of the severe economic blockade imposed on Iran.
2. Renewed military threats: Reuters reported on 20 October that Iranian officials were preparing for further US and Israeli attacks. US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss regional threats.
3. Diplomatic and electoral considerations: President Trump indicated that major new attacks would not occur before the US midterm elections on 3 November. Netanyahu also stated his opposition to a preemptive attack before the Israeli elections on 27 October. These statements matter, but do not constitute definitive guarantees.



4. Evidence of Iran's retaliatory capability: A Reuters investigation published on 15 October revealed at least 135 strikes on 84 critical infrastructure sites across the region since February. Attacks on Gulf infrastructure are therefore not merely a hypothetical Iranian threat; they have become a tangible feature of the conflict.
5. Mutual defense agreements between Saudi Arabia and Turkey and Pakistan, respectively, and an anticipated agreement with Egypt.

II. Strategic Drivers and Motivations

The main escalation triggers shaping the conflict include:

- Announcement of the collapse of negotiations.
- A new round of US strikes.
- A major Iranian attack that kills American personnel.
- Large-scale attacks on major energy facilities.
- Clear military preparations for ground operations, regardless of their scale or depth.

How Could Iran Respond?

Iran's potential options include:

- Using ballistic missiles.
- Launching cruise missiles.
- Conducting drone attacks.
- Deploying naval mines.
- Targeting commercial shipping.
- Conducting cyber operations.
- Relying on allied armed groups in the region.

Iran may also seek to impose high economic costs on the United States' regional partners instead of engaging in a conventional military confrontation on equal terms.

The strategic challenge for the United States is that weakening Iran’s conventional forces does not necessarily eliminate Iran’s ability to conduct lower-cost attacks on regional infrastructure (a central point in the Congressional Research Service assessment issued in September).

Prospects for Egyptian, Pakistani, and Turkish Participation

An important development occurred in August 2026, when Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey signed the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement, establishing a framework for mutual defense. Between 20 and 22 October, Turkey was working to complete parliamentary ratification procedures while the three countries discussed defense cooperation. The agreement does not automatically mean that these states have decided to join a US–Israeli attack on Iran.

Country	Documented position	Potential military role
Egypt	Parliament is considering authorizing military assistance to defend Saudi Arabia against Houthi attacks.	Protecting Saudi interests, securing the Red Sea, and providing defensive assistance. Offensive operations against Iran would require a separate political decision.
Pakistan	Has mediated between the United States and Iran and joined the defense agreement with Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It has not announced an offensive intervention against Iran.	Intelligence cooperation, air defense, logistical support, and assistance to Saudi Arabia under agreed arrangements.
Turkey	A NATO member and a party to the new defense agreement. Turkish officials have described the agreement as defensive.	Air defense, electronic warfare, intelligence, and logistical support.

Strategic Dimensions of Intervention

Egypt: Egyptian decisions involve two different theaters of operations. Egypt could help defend Saudi Arabia or secure Red Sea navigation without carrying out strikes inside Iran. Cairo also has a direct economic interest in the security of the Suez Canal. A drone incident in Damietta in July showed that Egypt could be affected by the war's spillover without participating in its principal operations.

Pakistan: The defense agreement with Saudi Arabia creates obligations and security expectations, but Islamabad must also manage its relationship with neighboring Iran. Pakistan may therefore combine defensive military cooperation with diplomatic mediation.

Turkey: Ankara has strategic autonomy, NATO relationships, regional economic interests, and significant ties with both the Gulf states and Iran. Participating in a collective-defense agreement does not commit Turkey to military operations aimed at changing the Iranian regime.

The essential conclusion is that defending Saudi territory, contributing to Gulf missile defense, and attacking Iran are three distinct political and military choices. Participation in one does not automatically mean participation in the others.

Prospects for Iraqi Shiite Militia Participation

This question has gone beyond theoretical possibility. Iran-linked Iraqi armed networks have already been involved in attacks during the conflict. Reuters reported on 19 June, citing eight Iraqi sources, that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had organized covert cells inside Iraq to attack Gulf countries hosting US forces. The sources described several drone attacks launched from Iraqi territory toward Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Possible Pathways for Expanded Militia Participation

Pathway	Strategic implications
Attacks on US facilities in Iraq	Could broaden the direct confrontation between the United States and militias and undermine Iraqi sovereignty.
Attacks on Kuwait or Saudi Arabia	Could open an additional regional front and adversely affect Iraq's diplomatic relations.
Coordination with Iranian forces	Could provide Tehran with additional means of pressure while complicating attribution of responsibility for attacks.

It is necessary to distinguish between the Iraqi state and its official institutions, the Popular Mobilization Forces as a broader institutional framework, and individual Iran-linked armed factions.

These actors do not necessarily adopt identical positions or decisions. Iraq's geography makes this theater especially important for Kuwait and northern Saudi Arabia. Iraq's domestic political divisions also make any major escalation difficult for Baghdad to manage. An Associated Press report in August documented US and Saudi strikes against facilities of Iran-backed militias in Iraq following attacks attributed to those networks, confirming that the Iraqi theater has already witnessed direct military responses.

III. Expected Scenarios

Based on the drivers and interactions on the ground, the main uncertainty centers on the following question:

Will the economic blockade lead to a negotiated settlement, or to another cycle of attacks and retaliation?

If Iran does not make concessions satisfactory to the American side (which would certainly be politically embarrassing for Iran), several scenarios can be envisaged. Four

escalation scenarios can be distinguished over the next six months.

Scenario One: Continuation of Limited Conflict

This scenario involves continuing intermittent attacks, naval confrontations, economic sanctions, and limited exchanges of missile strikes alongside ongoing negotiations.

It describes the prevailing situation, rather than a separate prediction of future developments.

Scenario Two: A Renewed Large-Scale Air and Missile Campaign

This scenario involves expanded US and Israeli military operations against Iranian military assets and capabilities, followed by broader Iranian responses.

Key indicators include:

- The deployment of additional US and Israeli military forces.
- The failure of negotiations or collapse of diplomatic arrangements.
- Decisions to widen the range of military targets.

Scenario Three: Transformation into a Broad Regional War

This scenario could involve attacks expanding to Gulf infrastructure, Iraqi armed groups, the Houthis in Yemen, maritime traffic, and potentially the armed forces of additional countries. Such escalation could result from a deliberate decision to widen the war or from military or political miscalculation.

Scenario Four: Ground Operations Inside Iran

Ground operations could take two forms:

6. Limited operations targeting coastal areas or particular strategic facilities. These could include short-duration missions or attempts to control specific maritime or coastal facilities. The US Congressional Research Service identifies Iranian coastal areas and Kharg Island among potential locations in an expansion of military operations.

7. A large-scale ground campaign aimed at controlling parts of Iranian territory. A full invasion would require a far greater military commitment than previous operations. Major challenges include Iran's vast geographic area, mountainous terrain, population size, armed forces and security institutions, and the difficulty of occupation and subsequent stabilization.

The arrival of additional US warships or aircraft in the region should not, by itself, be taken as evidence that a decision to invade Iran by land has been made. These two options differ fundamentally in their military and logistical requirements and political costs.

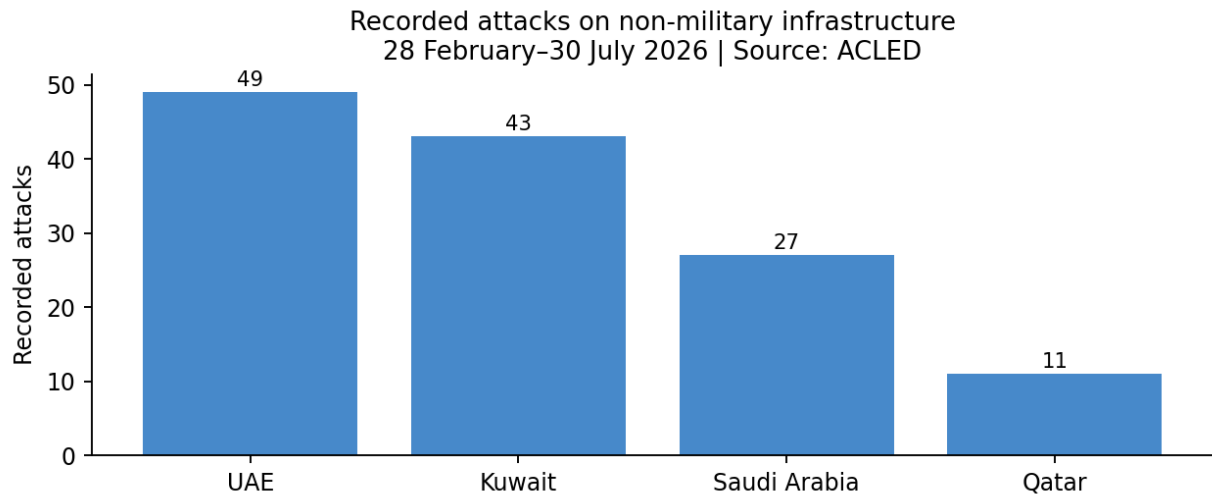
These scenarios are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a major air campaign could develop into a regional confrontation without a comprehensive ground invasion of Iran.

IV. Expected Impact on Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE

The Gulf states face two distinct types of risk:

- Type one: Direct damage from missiles and drones.
- Type two: System-wide disruption resulting from damage to a limited number of essential infrastructure systems.

Iranian infrastructure threats must be taken seriously because some have already been carried out. Nevertheless, the ability to cause severe damage does not mean possessing the capacity to destroy an entire country's infrastructure. Reuters reported in August that Iranian officials explicitly warned Gulf governments of possible attacks on oil facilities, power stations, desalination plants, and transport networks if US military operations continued.



State of Qatar

Principal areas of exposure:

- Production and export of liquefied natural gas, electricity, desalination, and maritime transportation.
- Qatar's role in regional mediation is an important source of diplomatic influence, but it has not prevented damage to its strategic infrastructure.
- Qatar has already suffered significant damage to its LNG infrastructure.
- Research published by Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy cites QatarEnergy estimates of potential revenue losses of up to \$20 billion annually over the following three to five years, in addition to substantial reconstruction costs. These are published estimates, not independently verified future losses.

Potential consequences for Qatar include increased fiscal pressure, the postponement of some investments, and disruption to air travel. Qatar's sovereign financial resources provide an important buffer against economic shocks, but financial resources cannot substitute for redundant operational systems and continuity of essential services.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Principal areas of exposure:

- Oil production and exports, pipelines, petrochemical facilities, critical maritime corridors, and attacks linked to the conflict in Yemen.
- Saudi Arabia must respond to direct Iranian threats and to the activities of armed organizations aligned with Tehran.
- Saudi Arabia's large geographic area and more extensive infrastructure networks, compared with some smaller Gulf states, provide options for operational continuity and substitution. Nevertheless, strategic installations and vital transport links remain vulnerable. Reuters reported intensified hostilities between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia in October.
- Saudi Arabia has also worked to develop defensive alliances with Pakistan and Turkey to strengthen deterrence.

Escalation could affect oil exports, industrial investment, infrastructure spending, aviation, and major economic diversification projects.

State of Kuwait

Principal areas of exposure:

Oil refining, electricity, desalination, airports, and possible attacks launched from nearby territory. Kuwait's geographic position presents an especially complex security environment. Kuwait has experienced repeated attacks on energy facilities and other infrastructure. ACLED documented attacks on refineries, airports, electricity facilities, and desalination plants. Reuters also reported a direct strike on a Kuwaiti power and desalination plant on 17 July, in response to US strikes on infrastructure in Iran.

Potential consequences for Kuwait include electricity and water outages, reduced refining capacity, disruption to aviation and trade, increased pressure on emergency services, and higher costs of infrastructure protection and repair.

United Arab Emirates

Principal areas of exposure:

- Major ports, oil and gas facilities, airports, electricity and water systems, international trade, and financial services.
- The UAE has suffered extensive attacks on its infrastructure while pursuing renewed diplomatic engagement with Iran.
- The UAE faces both physical and economic risks.
- Attacks can directly disrupt production, but even temporary closures and heightened security risks can affect the UAE's position as a global aviation, logistics, finance, and tourism hub.

The following table assesses the consequences of a serious disruption, should one occur, rather than the probability of an attack on a particular country.

Area of impact	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	UAE
Disruption to energy exports	Very significant	Very significant	Significant	Very significant
Electricity and desalination disruption	Very significant	Significant; varies geographically	Very significant	Very significant
Maritime disruption	Very significant for LNG exports	Significant, with some alternative routes	Very significant	Significant, with some alternatives
Disruption to aviation, trade and investment	Significant	Significant	Significant	Very significant
Infrastructure alternatives and financial reserves	Large financial reserves; limited alternatives for LNG exports	Larger geographic and infrastructure network	Financial reserves; relatively concentrated infrastructure	Diversified economy and multiple commercial hubs



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These differences are not predictions of Iran's targeting priorities.

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V. Benefits the United States and Israel Seek from the War

Three elements must be distinguished:

8. Declared strategic objectives.
9. Potential strategic advantages.
10. Costs and risks that may prevent those advantages from being realized.

First: United States of America

The US Congressional Research Service identifies several declared US objectives, including:

- Reducing Iranian missile and naval capabilities.
- Preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.
- Protecting US interests in the region.
- Countering Iranian restrictions on navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

Potential US objective	Potential strategic benefit	Main limitations
Reduce Iranian missile and naval capabilities	Reduce threats to US forces and regional partners	Iran may retain unconventional retaliatory capabilities.
Prevent Iranian nuclear weapons development	Reduce a source of security and proliferation concern	Military strikes may not resolve the nuclear issue in the long term.
Restore freedom of navigation	Improve security of international energy trade	Maritime security may require a sustained military presence.
Strengthen regional deterrence	Reassure partners and potentially prevent future attacks	Further attacks could increase the need for US protection.
Enhance negotiating leverage	Secure nuclear, security, or maritime concessions	Further pressure could harden Iranian positions.
Weaken the Iranian regime	Potentially change future Iranian regional policies	Regime collapse could create disorder rather than a cooperative successor.

It is essential to distinguish military success from political success. The United States might destroy additional military facilities without achieving an acceptable political settlement.

The war has also generated measurable costs. The US Congressional Research Service cited a Congressional Budget Office estimate placing the cost of US military operations through 1 August 2026 at \$38 billion, alongside concerns over munitions stockpiles and replenishment capacity.

Second: Israel

Israel's strategic objectives overlap with those of the United States, but its geographic position and security considerations create different priorities.

Potential Israeli objective	Potential strategic benefit	Main limitations
Reduce Iranian nuclear capabilities	Reduce fears of a hostile nuclear-armed regional power	Some facilities and expertise may survive or be rebuilt.
Weaken missile and drone capabilities	Reduce the scale of potential attacks on Israeli territory	Iran could preserve or reproduce some capabilities.
Weaken Iran-aligned armed networks	Reduce threats from groups hostile to Israel	These networks may adapt, fragment, or continue operating.
Limit Iranian regional influence	Change the regional security balance	Instability could give rise to new threats.
Strengthen US security commitments	Increase defense and intelligence cooperation	Continued US support depends on domestic and international considerations.

Israel's political environment in October is also an important factor. Reuters reported on 14 October that Netanyahu opposed a preemptive strike before the Israeli elections on 27 October while stating that Israel would respond to Iranian attacks. This was his stated position at that time, not a binding commitment regarding future decisions.

Can the War Deliver These Benefits?

This is the core strategic dilemma. A military strike may reduce a particular military capability, but the war's outcome depends on the following developments:

- Will Iran change its policies?
- Will regional partners become more secure?
- Will maritime trade resume on a stable basis?
- Will an implementable political settlement become possible?

Expanding military operations could instead produce a recurring cycle:

- US and Israeli strikes destroy Iranian military assets.
- Iran responds by attacking regional infrastructure.
- Gulf states seek additional security protection.
- All parties bear mounting military and economic costs.

This cycle does not necessarily achieve the original political objectives, even when individual military operations deliver tactical successes.

VI. Overall Strategic Conclusions

This interaction and confrontation reveal several early-warning indicators over the next 30 to 90 days. The assessment considers monitoring these indicators potentially more useful than assigning numerical probabilities to the outbreak or expansion of war amid substantial complexity and uncertainty.

Indicator	Potential strategic significance	Impact
US military movements and official operational announcements	Preparation to expand operations or strengthen deterrence	Very high
US and Israeli decisions after the October and November elections	Possible changes in political constraints on the use of military force	High
Continued Iranian missile launches and attacks on shipping	Movement to a higher level of confrontation	Very high
Diplomatic contacts involving Qatar, Pakistan, Oman, and Turkey	Opportunities for de-escalation and agreements	High
Turkish parliamentary procedures and Saudi–Pakistani–Turkish defense coordination	Evolution of regional defense commitments	Moderate
Militia activity originating in Iraq and Houthi attacks from Yemen	Growing pressure on Gulf infrastructure and regional security	Very high
Availability of defensive interceptor missiles	Ability to absorb additional strikes	Very high

Accordingly, some indicators are more critical and influential than others, as shown above. These critical indicators clearly support the military-escalation scenarios: Scenario Two (a renewed large-scale air and missile campaign) and Scenario Three (transformation into a broad regional war).

The available evidence also supports five important conclusions:

1. First: War is already under way if Iran does not make meaningful concessions. In that case, the immediate strategic issue is not the decision to initiate hostilities, but the scale of the next phase of escalation.
2. Second: Air and maritime operations are at the heart of the current conflict.

3. Limited ground operations are among the possibilities discussed in some official analyses, but a complete occupation of Iran may not be a realistic option because it would require a fundamentally different military commitment.
4. Third: Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey are developing or examining different forms of defensive participation, particularly in connection with Saudi Arabia. This defensive role should not be confused with a decision to conduct offensive operations against Iran.
5. Fourth: Iran-linked Iraqi armed groups have already participated in the regional conflict. Their future activities, and the Iraqi government's ability to restrain them, will be important variables.
6. Fifth: Gulf infrastructure security is not a secondary consequence of this war; it is one of its principal strategic dimensions. Iran has demonstrated its ability to impose substantial economic costs and infrastructure damage even as its conventional military capabilities sustain major losses.

For the Gulf states, the most important questions concern:

- Continuity of critical infrastructure operations.
- Defensive capacity and protection from missiles and drones.
- Alternative supply chains and transport routes.
- Protection of essential services.
- The Gulf states' ability to influence the diplomatic course of the crisis.

The Most Important Strategic Question

Can the United States and Israel, by expanding military operations against Iran, achieve more stable and sustainable regional security arrangements? Or will the continuation of the war deepen the harm to Gulf states from threats without securing a political settlement that ends the conflict? This question should be central to any strategic assessment of Gulf security over the coming months and years.

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