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The coming age of security competition in the wake of Israel-Iran conflict and challenges for the Gulf countries

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Introduction

The 12-day war between Israel and Iran is ushering in a new era for regional security in the Middle East, forcing the GCC countries to readjust their priorities in the years to come. In many ways, this episode marks a watershed whose full implications have yet to be observed.

Israel's calculus leading to its attack on Iranian territory underscores the shifting grounds in the balance of power since October 2023 and their transformative impact on the regional security dynamics. As it seeks to shape a new regional reality by force in contravention of law and morality, Israel had already undermined the fundamental tenets of rules-based order, generating a humanitarian tragedy in Gaza and beyond. Emboldened by the rapid erosion of Iran's asymmetrical capabilities and networks in Lebanon and Syria, its ability to leverage American establishment and power, and its military dominance cum technological

edge, Israel has not refrained from initiating a direct conflict. With this reckless move, however, it has broken many taboos that had previously served as pillars ensuring relative stability in the region. For one, gone is the assumption that attacking Iran would trigger an uncontrolled escalation cycle, which may lead to an all-out interstate conflict with destabilizing consequences on the region at large. Also buried under the rubble is the prudent thinking that the use of force against Iran's nuclear program will be counter-productive, pushing it further underground and incentivizing the weaponization of it.

Now that the genie is out, the region will have to brace for the demons of a long period of security competition until a new order settles in. While the true extent and nature of the regional security dynamics are hard to predict, a number of observations are in order.

Firstly, far from subduing, the Israel-Iran enmity will most likely deepen. The conflict revealed not only strengths but also weaknesses and

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limitations of both sides. As a ceasefire regime is underway, it will not be wrong to guess that the parties will hardly be driven by a concern to seek avenues to establish a durable 'peace'. Rather, what is likely to emerge is a 'frozen conflict', where both sides will be rearming for the next battle, based on the lessons learned.

While Israel may be the winner in this 'battle', it is far from getting closer to victory of any sort, let alone winning Netanyahu's perennial 'war on evil.' Currently no clear assessment is available on the actual 'downgrading' of Iran's nuclear capability, nor has Netanyahu achieved much regarding the regime change agenda in Tehran. Israel's vulnerability to the Iranian counter-reaction through missile strikes has been revealed unequivocally. While it will increase investments to maintain and expand the qualitative military edge over Iran, it will pursue regime change through other means as well. Beyond the Iran-Israel dynamics, however, it is also clear that Israel obviously cannot dictate an order in the region, based on military edge alone, and it is hardly the 'regional power' that it may be envisioning itself to be. Even this reckless military show of force will prove to be counterproductive for its attempts to create regional integration

frameworks through infrastructure, connectivity agenda, and a vision of cooperation in technological and economic fields. In any case, while it can count on the US and Western support as a last resort, Israel will continue to live with its fortress mentality in the Middle East.

While Iran has been weakened, a regime change is not on the horizon. Granted, the survival of the regime most probably does not mean the continuation of business as usual in Tehran, and major overhauls of the Iranian security and governance apparatus to address the deficiencies will follow a damage assessment. Meanwhile, as much as 'putting its home in order' and 'defending the homeland' emerge as number one priorities, it will be unlikely to forego its support for proxies as part of a redesign of regional policies. In any case, Iran also realizes that self-help will be the norm in this coming battle, as it bitterly experienced the limitations of Chinese and Russian support, and undermined the rapprochement with the GCC countries, which might have laid the ground for a cooperative security regime.

Secondly, the jury is still out on the future of the nuclear program. While the actual damage on the Iranian nuclear program and remaining

enrichment capacity are hard to assess without independent verification, one certain lesson to be drawn from the recent episode of Israeli aggression and erosion of international legal order for Iran -or any other country for that matter- is that 'you must have nuclear weapons in this self-help environment.' Nuclear proliferation is an ever-increasing possibility, since not only Iran but also other regional actors, especially Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, are reading the same strategic environment. Only in exchange for a comprehensive deal on sanctions relief, Iran may accept to keep its nuclear program under international monitoring, but given the legacy of inconclusive negotiations in the past, the new level of mutual distrust in the aftermath of the latest conflict, such a deal is unlikely to emerge. The outcome is that Iran will most probably seek ways to revive it as part of a massive militarization drive to prepare for the next battle, exploring ways to do so outside international monitoring.

Thirdly, the conflict reiterated once again how the United States, through its action and inaction, remains central to the security dynamics and a major determinant of regional politics in the Middle East. From the very beginning, under both Biden and Trump administrations, Washington was

complicit in Netanyahu's reckless drive to regionalize conflict. While his leveraging of Netanyahu to agree to the ceasefire was instrumental to the cessation of conflict eventually, through his decision to bomb Iran, President Trump has already opened major floodgates to future instability. As the role of 'American pacifier' remains elusive, the United States is further apart from the idea of creating an inclusive regional security architecture. Given the other looming geopolitical hotspots on the global agenda, ranging from Russia-Ukraine conflict to Taiwan, the United States is far from undertaking a decisive reengagement with the Middle East, which may mitigate the deepening of conflict spiral. Beyond a continuing commitment to Israel's security and survival, what security guarantees the United States can extend to its allies and partners are uncertain.

Last but not the least, having reactively observed the rapid escalation of hostilities into a direct inter-state war and the manner in which the conflict has been resolved for now, other regional actors will be forced to rethink their security policies. In the aftermath of this conflict, for their part, the Gulf countries have to reckon with the implications of a new reality of unrestrained security

competition and an era of hard power and self-help that will shape regional affairs. Despite deep interest in region-wide cooperation and integration schemes, and interconnectivity and infrastructure projects, the permissive window opened by the normalization and de-escalation wave of 2021-2022 is no longer there. Gulf countries will have to put security and defense concerns before the economic transformation and reform agenda, and rethink their partnerships accordingly. Particularly important is the implications of this episode for the Gulf agency within the Middle Eastern security complex. Far from preventing this deadly escalation, they had to endure the symbolic manner in which the road to ceasefire was paved, which will have far-reaching ramifications for the strategic autonomy of Gulf countries. The deal to allow Iran's retaliatory attack on Al Udaid base, however premediated it can be and however successfully it might have been responded to, dealt a blow to the sovereignty of a key GCC member, Qatar. Hence, it underscored not only their physical vulnerability but also security dependence on external actors who did not refrain from settling their scores at Gulf expense and on Gulf territory. This will not go unnoticed, as GCC countries deliberate on how to

manage their relations with Iran in this volatile environment.

Despite the extension of their wealth, alleged leverage over the United States, which was on display during Trump's visit in May, and recent normalization tracks with Israel and Iran, the Gulf countries have noticed they are far from being the global centers of power. They have been reminded boldly that economic power matters only so much, and when push comes to shove in the realm of security and military prowess, they have to defer to the interests, priorities and whims of Washington or the occupant of White House. Short of alternative security providers, yet another dimension of regional geopolitics which was aptly revealed with the inability of Russia or China to play any meaningful roles, the Gulf monarchies will have to live with the same Faustian bargain(s) with the United States in the looming security competition in coming years.

In this environment of self-help and strategic uncertainty, the most pressing lesson for the Gulf countries will be to revisit the intra-GCC unity, with a serious reconsideration of ways to deepen security cooperation. As they are subject to the same systemic pressures, it is high time to recognize that their security and stability are tightly

interconnected and the best way to leverage their wealth into strategic power is to move beyond unilateral bargains and act on a collective platform.

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About the Gulf Insights series

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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