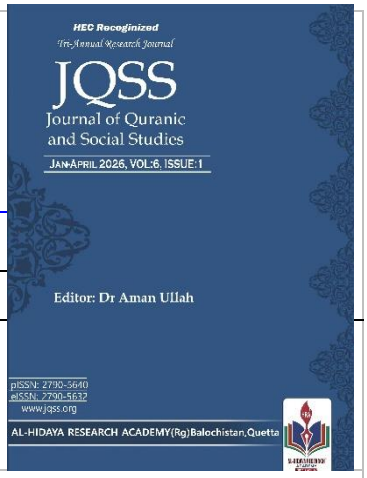
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Regional Dynamics in the Middle East: Iran-UAE Relations and American-Israeli Strategic Engagement

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing regional relationship between Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) against the wider security environment created by the United States' military presence in the Gulf and the UAE's expanding strategic relationship with Israel. The study treats the Iran-UAE relationship not as an isolated bilateral dispute but as part of a wider regional security system in which territorial disagreements, competing threat perceptions, military partnerships, and external power involvement interact. Particular attention is given to the Iranian missile and drone attacks on Gulf states following the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran in February 2026 and to the UAE's political and security response. The paper also considers the significance of American defence cooperation, the UAE-Israel relationship, and the resulting perceptions of deterrence and vulnerability in the Gulf. A qualitative case-study approach is used, drawing on scholarly literature, official statements, and credible contemporary reporting. The analysis is guided by Realism, which helps explain why states respond to perceived threats by strengthening military capabilities, forming partnerships, and attempting to improve their strategic position. The study argues that the recent escalation cannot be understood solely through Iran-UAE bilateral relations. It reflects a broader interaction between regional competition and external strategic engagement. The paper concludes that stronger defence partnerships may enhance short-term deterrence for the UAE, but they can also deepen threat perceptions in Tehran and contribute to a security dilemma. Sustainable regional stability therefore requires military preparedness to be accompanied by diplomatic channels, confidence-building measures, and mechanisms for such crisis management.

Keywords: Iran-UAE Relations; Regional Dynamics; Strategic Engagement; Gulf Security; United States; Israel; Foreign Policy; Geopolitical Rivalry; Strategic Partnerships; Balance of Power
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1. Introduction

The Middle East is characterized by overlapping security concerns, competing national interests, and the continued involvement of external powers. States in the Gulf have developed extensive diplomatic, economic, and military relationships with major international actors in response to a regional environment in which security threats can quickly cross national borders. The result is a political landscape in which bilateral relations are frequently affected by wider alliance structures and perceptions of power. The Gulf is therefore not simply a collection of separate state relationships; it is a connected strategic space in which actions by one actor can alter the calculations of several others (Gause, 2019; Kamrava, 2022).

Iran and the UAE occupy particularly important positions within this environment. Their relationship contains both cooperation and competition. Trade and economic interaction have existed alongside disagreements over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb, as well as differences over Iran's regional policies and the UAE's security partnerships. The relationship is therefore better understood as a combination of economic interdependence, strategic mistrust, and pragmatic diplomacy rather than as a permanently hostile bilateral relationship.

The regional security picture became considerably more volatile after the United States and Israel launched strikes against Iran on February 28, 2026. Iran subsequently fired missiles toward several Gulf states, including the UAE. Reuters reported that many incoming missiles were intercepted by regional air-defence systems, while the attacks nevertheless caused casualties, damage, and disruption. UAE and other Gulf leaders also called for restraint and diplomacy, illustrating the tension between the need for immediate security protection and the desire to avoid a wider regional war (Reuters, 2026a).

These developments make the UAE an important case for examining the interaction between regional actors and external powers. The UAE maintains a close security relationship with the United States and has developed significant diplomatic and strategic ties with Israel since the 2020 Abraham Accords. From Iran's perspective, the presence of American forces and the growing UAE-Israel relationship can be interpreted as part of a changing strategic environment. From the UAE's perspective, cooperation with external partners provides important capabilities for deterrence and national defence. This difference in threat perception is central to understanding the security dilemma in the Gulf.

The present study therefore asks how Iran-UAE relations have been affected by the wider regional security environment, how the UAE has responded to Iranian attacks, and how American and Israeli strategic engagement has shaped the calculations of the parties involved. Rather than treating external engagement as the sole cause of

regional instability, the paper considers it one element within a larger system of domestic, bilateral, regional, and international pressures.

2. Problem Statement

Iran-UAE relations are shaped by a combination of unresolved territorial issues, economic interaction, security concerns, and competing regional partnerships. The central problem is that bilateral developments cannot be adequately explained without considering the wider strategic environment. The UAE's security cooperation with the United States and its relationship with Israel exist alongside Iran's concerns about foreign military presence and the changing balance of power in the Gulf.

The February 2026 escalation demonstrated the practical consequences of these overlapping relationships. Iran's attacks on Gulf states brought the wider U.S.-Iran confrontation directly into the security environment of the UAE. The attacks also demonstrated the importance of missile defence, military readiness, diplomatic signalling, and economic resilience. At the same time, the crisis showed that Gulf states do not necessarily share identical threat perceptions or preferred responses.

The problem addressed by this research is therefore the interaction between Iran-UAE relations and the broader regional security structure involving the United States and Israel. The study seeks to understand how external strategic engagement affects threat perceptions, alliance behaviour, defence policies, and prospects for regional stability.

3. Research Objectives

1. To examine the principal political and strategic factors shaping contemporary Iran-UAE relations.
2. To analyze the UAE's political, diplomatic, and security response to Iranian missile and drone attacks.
3. To examine the role of the United States in the UAE's security environment and defence posture.
4. To assess the significance of UAE-Israel strategic engagement for Gulf security dynamics.
5. To explore how changing alliances and threat perceptions affect the regional balance of power.
6. To examine the possible economic, diplomatic, and security consequences of regional escalation.
7. To identify policy approaches that could reduce the risk of further escalation and support regional stability.

4. Research Questions

1. What political and strategic factors shape contemporary Iran-UAE relations?
2. How has the UAE responded politically, diplomatically, and strategically to Iranian attacks?
3. What role does the United States play in the UAE's security calculations?
4. How does the UAE-Israel relationship affect Gulf security dynamics and Iranian threat perceptions?
5. How do external powers and regional alliances influence decision-making in the Gulf?
6. What are the implications of these dynamics for regional security, economic stability, and diplomacy?

5. Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it places Iran-UAE relations within the wider architecture of Gulf security. Much discussion of the region separates bilateral relations from international alliances, yet the two are closely connected. A change in one relationship can alter the calculations of other states. Examining the UAE's position therefore helps illuminate how a relatively small but economically and strategically important Gulf state manages security in an environment dominated by larger regional and global powers.

The study is also relevant to contemporary policy debates. The 2026 escalation demonstrated that conflict between major powers can quickly create risks for Gulf states, even when those states are not the original parties to the confrontation. The resulting threats to aviation, shipping, energy infrastructure, and commercial activity show why regional security cannot be treated solely as a military issue. It also requires diplomatic coordination and economic risk management.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Iran-UAE Relations

Iran and the UAE have maintained a relationship that combines economic pragmatism with strategic disagreement. Trade, investment, and geographical proximity have created incentives for continued engagement, while disputes over Abu Musa and the Tunb islands and differences over regional security have generated persistent mistrust. Gulf politics literature emphasizes that the behaviour of Gulf states is shaped by both their immediate security concerns and their relationships with external powers (Gause, 2019; Kamrava, 2022).

The UAE's foreign policy has increasingly sought to combine economic openness with strategic diversification. This approach allows Abu Dhabi to maintain relationships with major powers while developing its own defence capabilities and regional partnerships. Iran, however, has often interpreted the expansion of Western and Israeli security relationships in the Gulf through the lens of strategic vulnerability. These contrasting interpretations can produce a security dilemma in which defensive measures by one side are interpreted as offensive preparations by the other.

6.2 The United States and Gulf Security

The United States has maintained a major security role in the Gulf for decades. American military capabilities, defence cooperation, and regional partnerships have contributed to deterrence and provided Gulf states with access to advanced security technologies. For the UAE, this relationship has included access to sophisticated air and missile defence capabilities. The UAE Ministry of Defence describes cooperation with international allies as part of its broader approach to national defence and strategic planning (UAE Ministry of Defence, 2026).

At the same time, the American presence is viewed differently by different regional actors. Gulf partners generally regard U.S. security commitments as an important component of deterrence, while Iran has historically opposed the presence of U.S. military forces in the Gulf. Consequently, American involvement can simultaneously reduce the perceived vulnerability of one state and increase the threat perception of another.

6.3 UAE-Israel Strategic Engagement

The normalization of UAE-Israel relations through the Abraham Accords in 2020 created a significant new dimension in Gulf politics. The relationship has expanded beyond formal diplomacy into areas such as technology, trade, security cooperation, and strategic coordination. For the UAE, the relationship offers opportunities for economic and technological cooperation as well as an additional security partnership. For Iran, closer Israeli ties with a Gulf state represent a development with potential implications for its regional security calculations.

The significance of UAE-Israel engagement should therefore not be reduced to a simple alliance against Iran. The UAE has multiple foreign-policy objectives, including economic diversification, diplomatic positioning, national defence, and regional influence. The relationship with Israel forms one part of this wider strategy. Nevertheless, its security dimension can affect Iranian perceptions and contribute to competitive regional alignment.

6.4 The 2026 Escalation and Gulf Security

The February 28, 2026 escalation brought these underlying dynamics into sharper focus. Reuters reported that following U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran, Tehran

launched missile attacks toward Gulf states including the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. Many missiles were intercepted, but the attacks produced casualties, damage, and significant disruption. Gulf governments simultaneously emphasized defence readiness and the need to avoid further escalation (Reuters, 2026a).

Subsequent incidents extended the security consequences into maritime and economic domains. Reuters reported that the UAE accused Iran of an attack on an ADNOC-linked tanker in May 2026 and later reported further tensions around maritime traffic and UAE-Iran economic relations. These developments demonstrate that the effects of the conflict extend beyond territory and military targets to trade routes, energy security, shipping, and financial relations (Reuters, 2026b; Reuters, 2026c).

7. Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial analysis of Iran's regional strategy, Gulf security, U.S. involvement, and the changing relationship between Gulf states and Israel. However, there is value in bringing these strands together through a focused examination of Iran-UAE relations during the 2026 escalation. The UAE occupies a distinct position because it maintains economic links with Iran while simultaneously developing strong security relationships with the United States and Israel.

This study addresses that gap by examining the interaction of bilateral relations and external strategic engagement. Its contribution lies less in treating the conflict as a simple two-state confrontation and more in explaining how overlapping partnerships and threat perceptions shape the behaviour of states within the Gulf security system.

8. Theoretical Framework: Realism

The study is guided by Realism in international relations. Realist approaches emphasize the absence of a central authority in the international system and argue that states must ultimately rely on their own capabilities and partnerships to protect national interests. Power, security, survival, deterrence, and strategic calculation are therefore central concepts (Morgenthau, 1948;Waltz, 1979).

Realism provides a useful framework for interpreting Iran-UAE relations. The UAE's development of defence capabilities and partnerships can be understood as an effort to reduce vulnerability. Iran's concern about American and Israeli strategic engagement can similarly be interpreted as a response to a perceived change in the regional distribution of power. Actions that one actor considers defensive may therefore appear threatening to another actor.

The theory also helps explain why alliances and strategic partnerships become more important during periods of uncertainty. The UAE's security relationships with the United States and Israel increase its access to military and technological capabilities. Iran, meanwhile, seeks to preserve strategic autonomy and resist what it regards as

hostile encirclement. The resulting interaction can create a cycle in which each side's attempt to improve its security contributes to the other's insecurity.

9. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design. The decision to use a qualitative approach is based on the nature of the research questions and the evidence available in the source material. The study does not claim to present original survey statistics because no completed questionnaire dataset, sample size, response rate, or statistical output was supplied in the original manuscript. Instead, the analysis is based on documentary evidence and secondary sources.

The case selected is contemporary Iran-UAE relations within the wider Gulf security environment, with particular attention to the 2026 escalation. Sources include academic books and media houses on Persian Gulf politics and international relations, official UAE material, and credible contemporary reporting. The analysis uses thematic interpretation to identify recurring themes: threat perception, strategic partnerships, deterrence, alliance behaviour, economic vulnerability, and diplomatic responses.

The study is interpretive rather than causal in a strict statistical sense. It identifies relationships and patterns in the available evidence but does not claim that any single external actor caused the conflict. This distinction is important because regional crises usually result from multiple interacting political and strategic factors.

10. Analysis and Discussion

10.1 Iran's Security Perceptions

Iran's regional security calculations are shaped by concerns about foreign military presence, strategic isolation, and the possibility that neighbouring states may facilitate hostile military activity. The UAE's close relationship with Washington and its growing ties with Israel therefore form part of the environment through which Tehran assesses regional threats. The 2026 escalation demonstrated how quickly these perceptions can become connected to direct military action.

At the same time, explaining Iranian behaviour solely through the UAE's partnerships would be too narrow. The 2026 confrontation followed direct U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran, making the wider U.S.-Iran confrontation central to the escalation. Iranian attacks on Gulf states were therefore connected to a broader strategic confrontation, even though they created direct security consequences for the UAE.

10.2 The UAE's Security Response

The UAE's response illustrates the importance of layered security. Air and missile defence provides an immediate means of protecting territory, while diplomatic communication can help prevent an incident from becoming a wider war. Reuters reported that the UAE and other Gulf governments emphasized restraint and diplomacy even while responding to incoming attacks (Reuters, 2026a). This

combination reflects the UAE's broader preference for maintaining economic openness and political stability while protecting national security.

The UAE's security strategy also reflects a long-term effort to diversify partnerships. American defence cooperation offers access to advanced capabilities, while the relationship with Israel creates additional channels for technology and security cooperation. Such partnerships can improve deterrence, but they also have strategic signalling effects. When Iran views these relationships as part of an expanding hostile network, security cooperation may unintentionally deepen the very threat perceptions it is intended to deter.

10.3 American Strategic Engagement

The United States remains an important component of the Gulf security architecture. Its military presence and defence relationships provide reassurance to partners such as the UAE. The February 2026 attacks demonstrated the practical significance of this architecture because several Gulf states hosting U.S. personnel or maintaining close relations with Washington became targets of Iranian retaliation (Reuters, 2026a).

American engagement therefore has a dual effect. It strengthens the defensive capacity of U.S. partners, but it can also make those partners more closely associated with Washington in the eyes of Tehran. The resulting security dilemma is a central feature of the regional environment.

10.4 Israeli Strategic Engagement

The UAE-Israel relationship adds another layer to Gulf geopolitics. Since normalization in 2020, cooperation has expanded across several sectors. In security terms, closer relations can provide the UAE with additional technology, expertise, and channels of coordination. Yet Israeli involvement also has symbolic and strategic importance because Iran regards Israel as a major adversary.

The paper therefore treats American and Israeli engagement as connected but not identical. The United States provides a broader military and strategic framework in the Gulf, while Israel's relationship with the UAE has developed through a newer regional partnership. Their effects on UAE policy should be assessed separately as well as together.

10.5 Economic and Diplomatic Consequences

Security crises in the Gulf have consequences far beyond military operations. The region is central to global energy markets, shipping, aviation, investment, and trade. Disruption to the Strait of Hormuz or Gulf transport routes can increase costs and uncertainty well beyond the immediate conflict zone. Reuters reported that the 2026

conflict and subsequent maritime tensions affected shipping and energy markets and contributed to wider economic uncertainty (Reuters, 2026c).

For the UAE, economic resilience is closely connected to national security. Its international commercial position depends on perceptions of stability and reliable access to transport and energy infrastructure. Consequently, diplomatic de-escalation is not separate from the UAE's economic interests; it is an important part of protecting them.

10.6 Regional Balance of Power

The developments examined in this study indicate that Gulf security is increasingly characterized by overlapping partnerships rather than a single alliance structure. The UAE's relationships with the United States and Israel coexist with its geographical and economic relationship with Iran. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other GCC states have their own calculations and may respond differently to the same threat. This diversity complicates efforts to create a single regional response.

From a realist perspective, these differences are understandable because states assess threats according to their own interests and capabilities. Regional stability therefore depends not only on the distribution of power but also on whether states can establish communication mechanisms that prevent defensive actions from being misinterpreted as preparations for attack.

11. Findings

1. The Iran-UAE relationship is embedded in a wider regional security structure and cannot be adequately understood as an isolated bilateral dispute.

2. The 2026 escalation demonstrated how confrontation involving major powers can rapidly create direct security risks for Gulf states.

3. The UAE's security response combines military preparedness, external partnerships, and diplomatic efforts to contain escalation.

4. American strategic engagement strengthens UAE deterrence and defence capabilities while also contributing to Iranian threat perceptions.

5. UAE-Israel strategic engagement has become an additional factor in the regional security calculations of Iran and the Gulf states.

6. Regional alliances can strengthen security for individual states while simultaneously contributing to a broader security dilemma.

7. The economic consequences of escalation include risks to shipping, energy infrastructure, aviation, trade, and investor confidence.

8. Realism provides a useful explanation of the emphasis on security, deterrence, strategic partnerships, and balance-of-power behaviour.

12. Conclusion

This study examined Iran-UAE relations within the broader regional environment created by American and Israeli strategic engagement in the Middle East. The analysis shows that the relationship between Iran and the UAE is multidimensional. Economic interaction and diplomatic pragmatism exist alongside territorial disagreements, security concerns, and competing strategic partnerships.

The 2026 escalation demonstrated the extent to which these dynamics can become interconnected. Following U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran, Iranian attacks reached several Gulf states, including the UAE. The episode showed both the value of advanced defence partnerships and the risks associated with being located within a highly contested strategic environment. It also reinforced the importance of diplomacy because military deterrence alone cannot remove the underlying sources of mistrust.

The study does not conclude that American or Israeli engagement alone explains the deterioration of Iran-UAE relations. Rather, these relationships interact with Iran's strategic objectives, the UAE's security priorities, regional rivalries, unresolved territorial questions, and the wider U.S.-Iran confrontation. The central finding is therefore that contemporary Gulf security is produced by a network of interacting relationships.

Realism helps explain why states continue to prioritize security and strategic partnerships under conditions of uncertainty. However, a purely power-based approach is insufficient for achieving long-term stability. Defence capabilities may deter attacks, but sustained stability also requires diplomatic communication, crisis-management mechanisms, and confidence-building arrangements among regional states. For the UAE and its neighbours, the challenge is to maintain credible deterrence without creating an escalating cycle of mutual insecurity.

13. Recommendations

1. Iran and the GCC states should strengthen direct communication channels for managing military incidents and reducing miscalculation.

2. The UAE should continue developing defensive capabilities while maintaining diplomatic channels with neighbouring states, including Iran.

3. Regional states should develop confidence-building measures covering maritime security, airspace incidents, and critical infrastructure.

4. The United States should combine credible deterrence with sustained diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing escalation in the Gulf.
5. UAE-Israel security cooperation should be accompanied by transparent diplomatic engagement with other regional actors where appropriate.
6. Gulf states should strengthen joint mechanisms for protecting shipping, energy infrastructure, aviation, and other critical economic assets.
7. Future research should use primary interviews or survey data to test how policymakers, experts, and informed citizens perceive the changing regional security environment.
8. Future studies should also compare the UAE's approach with the responses of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman to identify differences in Gulf threat perceptions and foreign-policy strategies.

14. Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by its reliance on publicly available documentary and secondary evidence. Military operations, intelligence assessments, and diplomatic negotiations often contain information that is not publicly accessible. Consequently, some aspects of state decision-making cannot be examined directly.

A second limitation is the rapidly changing nature of the 2026 regional crisis. Events, ceasefires, negotiations, military incidents, and economic measures may change the context after the research is completed. The findings should therefore be understood as an analysis of the evidence available at the time of writing rather than a final account of a continuing regional process.

A further limitation is that the study does not use an original survey dataset. The original manuscript described a questionnaire-based quantitative design but did not provide a completed dataset, sample size, response rate, or statistical results. The present version therefore adopts a qualitative case-study design rather than presenting unsupported numerical findings.

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