

When Ummah Meets Realpolitik: The Iran–USA Conflict and the Fracturing of Muslim Unity

A Geopolitical Analysis | July 2026 | Compiled by Haya Al Aflah

Introduction

When the United States and Israel launched coordinated airstrikes on Iran on 28 February 2026 - an operation Washington named “Operation Epic Fury” - many publics and commentators across the Muslim world expected the concept of *ummah* (the global Muslim community) to produce some form of collective political response. The expectation was historically grounded: pan-Islamic solidarity has been invoked at every major moment of perceived Western aggression against Muslim-majority states, from the Gulf War to the invasion of Iraq to the siege of Gaza. Structural-realist scholars, by contrast, predicted from the outset that state interest would prevail - and it did. What materialised was a pattern of behaviour that confirmed the realists and confounded the popular expectation: Arab governments that had spent years trying to prevent this war found themselves accommodating American firepower from their soil, and in some reported cases striking Iranian targets themselves.

The stakes of that divergence were not abstract. The opening salvo of Operation Epic Fury killed Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with dozens of senior officials - the first decapitation of a sitting head of state of a major Muslim country by Western military action in the modern era - and, in the same wave of strikes, a missile hit a girls’ school near Bandar Abbas, killing roughly 170 civilians. Both events occurred during Ramadan. If any events could have been expected to activate pan-Islamic solidarity as a political force, it was these. That they did not - that no Muslim-majority government took material action in Iran’s defence - is the puzzle this article sets out to explain.

The conflict arose from years of escalating pressure over Iran’s nuclear programme, the collapse of indirect diplomatic negotiations brokered by Oman in early 2026, and a series of earlier Israeli military campaigns beginning in June 2025 that had significantly degraded Iranian defences. As the Council on Foreign Relations noted, the US and Israel launched the 28 February assault with the stated aim of toppling the regime in Tehran. Iran retaliated by firing missiles and drones at US bases and civilian infrastructure across the Gulf - striking every Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state in the process. Hostilities ran from 28 February to 17 June 2026, punctuated by several failed ceasefire attempts, before a durable cessation took hold; the war ended with the Iranian state battered and leaderless but intact, and with no negotiated settlement of the underlying nuclear dispute.

The response of Muslim-majority governments to this moment reveals a structural truth about the modern international system that no amount of theological solidarity can override for most states, security architecture, economic dependency, and strategic rivalry determine foreign policy far more decisively than religious identity. This article examines why, tracing the contours of US military presence

in the Muslim world, the divergent Arab state responses during the conflict, the Sunni–Shia geopolitical divide, the limited role of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the behaviour of the non-Arab Muslim heavyweights, and the structural forces that make genuine Muslim political unity elusive.



Key Finding 1: The US Military Footprint in the Muslim World

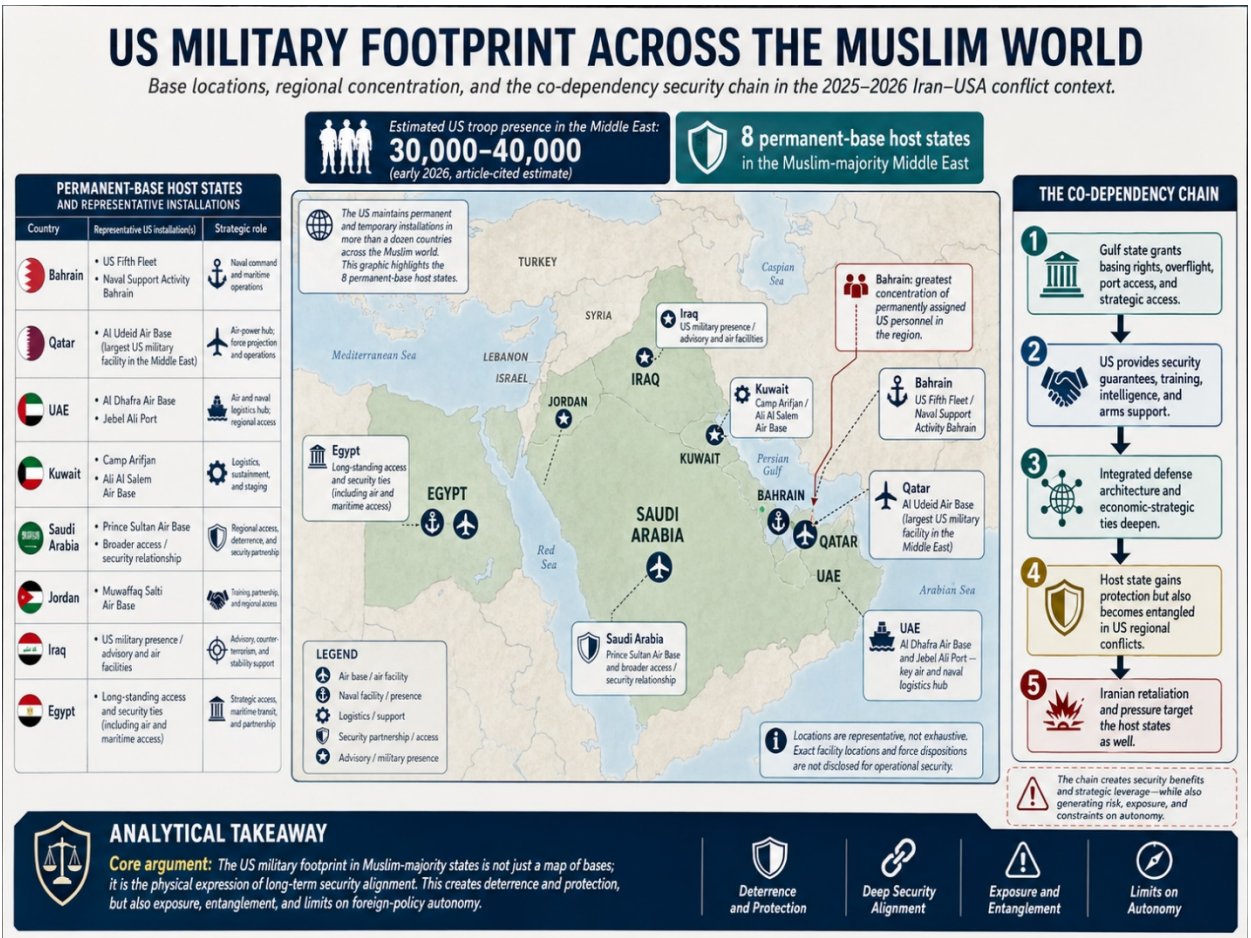
To understand why Muslim-majority states did not unify against the United States, one must first reckon with the depth of American military entrenchment across the region. As Al Jazeera reported in February 2026, the United States maintained between 30,000 and 40,000 troops in the Middle East, operating from a network of permanent and temporary installations spanning more than a dozen countries. Of these, eight are permanent bases, located in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates - all Muslim-majority states.

The scale of individual installations is telling. Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, is the largest US military facility in the entire Middle East. Bahrain serves as the home of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and hosts the greatest concentration of permanently assigned American military personnel anywhere in the region. The UAE hosts Al Dhafra Air Base, where - according to Chatham House's research on US military policy in the Middle East - the Pentagon stores more jet fuel than at any other facility in the world, while the deep-water port at Jebel Ali near Dubai is the most frequently visited foreign port for the US Navy globally.

This infrastructure reflects what Chatham House describes as a deep "co-dependency" that has evolved over more than two decades: Gulf states exchange basing rights and strategic access for American security guarantees, creating a mutual entanglement from which neither side can easily exit. In practice,

the Middle East Institute has observed, American bases in the Gulf are not the *cause* of the security relationship between these states and Washington - they are its *consequence*, the physical expression of a strategic alignment that predates the current conflict by decades.

The strategic consequences of this arrangement became lethally apparent in the 2026 conflict. As the CFR’s Steven Cook reported in March 2026, Iran’s strategy from the outset was to “inflict significant pain on Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia so that they would in turn pressure the United States to end the hostilities.” Iran struck US embassies and military installations across all six GCC states - targeting them explicitly because they hosted the infrastructure of the adversary. Countries that had tried hardest to remain neutral became, by virtue of their security architecture, collateral participants in a war they had done everything to avoid.



Key Finding 2: A War That Split the Gulf

The behaviour of Arab states during the conflict did not resemble that of neutral hosts reluctantly caught in the crossfire - but neither did it resemble a bloc marching in step behind Washington. The war’s most revealing feature at the state level was *divergence*: the Gulf split between accommodation

and confrontation, and the split itself is the strongest evidence for the structural argument this article advances.

The confrontational pole: the UAE

The United Arab Emirates reportedly moved furthest toward belligerency. The Wall Street Journal and Reuters reported - in accounts that were anonymously sourced and never officially confirmed by the Emirati government - what Newsweek described as “the first known offensive actions by Gulf states against Tehran since the US and Israel launched strikes”: the UAE allegedly targeted an Iranian oil refinery on Lavan Island in a covert operation using warplanes and drones coordinated with the US and Israel. The Times of Israel, citing the Journal, further reported that the UAE conducted dozens of strikes on Iran across the duration of the war and amid ceasefire periods, using intelligence support from both the US and Israel. Emirati leadership, on this reporting, had come to believe that confrontation could be strategically transformative - a decisive setback to the Iranian threat that decades of hedging had failed to deliver.

The accommodationist pole: Saudi Arabia and most of the GCC

Saudi Arabia’s trajectory was more ambivalent and reading it as one-way escalation misstates the record. Bloomberg reported in March 2026 that Riyadh agreed to grant the US military access to King Fahd Air Base, “an apparent reversal after saying its bases couldn’t be used to attack its longtime rival,” and the Saudi Royal Air Force reportedly struck Iranian drone and missile-launch sites and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq after Iranian missiles hit Saudi territory. But Riyadh simultaneously refused to allow US strike operations from Prince Sultan Air Base or through Saudi airspace - a refusal that at one point forced a pause in US operations - and publicly acknowledged only logistical support. As late as June, serious assessments held that the Gulf states were essentially “sitting this war out,” with the UAE having formally ruled out the use of its territory or airspace to attack Iran even as covert strikes were being attributed to it. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman followed Riyadh’s de-escalatory lead throughout.

The two poles pulled against each other. The Wall Street Journal noted that the extent of the reported Emirati response “strained tensions among Gulf countries, with Saudi Arabia pressuring the US to have the UAE halt the strikes.” The Soufan Center documented how Iranian attacks on Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states prompted the GCC states and Jordan to issue a joint statement calling on Baghdad to take “necessary measures” to halt pro-Iranian militia attacks from Iraqi territory - collective pressure aimed at containment, not escalation.

Divergence as confirmation of the structural thesis

This split is not an inconvenient complication for the realist argument - it is its cleanest confirmation. If religious identity governed foreign policy, two Sunni-led Gulf monarchies facing the same adversary should have behaved identically. Instead, different threat perceptions, different economic exposures,

THE INTRA-GULF SPECTRUM AND WIDER MUSLIM-MAJORITY STATE POSITIONS							
During the Iran–USA Conflict (28 Feb – 17 June 2026)							
	CONFRONTATION (Reported)	LOGISTICAL ACCOMMODATION (Enabling US Operations)	STRATEGIC BALANCING (Neutral / Limited Role)	ACTIVE DE-ESCALATION (Mediation & Dialogue)	IRAN-ALIGNED / CRITICAL OF US-ISRAEL		
INTRA-GULF SPECTRUM	UAE (Reported) - Reported strikes on Iranian targets - Strong security alignment with US & Israel	SAUDI ARABIA - Provided airspace and logistical support - Did not join strikes directly	BAHRAIN - Hosted US Fifth Fleet - Supported US operations logistically	KUWAIT - Granted access to US forces - Supported logistics and basing	QATAR - Hosted Al Udeid Air Base (major US hub) - Played quiet diplomatic role; urged restraint	OMAN - Brokered US–Iran talks (early 2026) - Continued mediation during the war	(No GCC state) —
WIDER ARAB STATES	Egypt - Supported US position - Provided overflight and access	Jordan - Allowed use of airspace - Coordinated security	Iraq (Govt.) - Formally neutral - Faced attacks on US bases	Morocco - Neutral stance - No material involvement	Algeria - Called for de-escalation - Opposed strikes politically	Tunisia - Condemned aggression - No material involvement	Lebanon (Hezbollah) - Publicly backed Iran - Rhetorical support for resistance
NON-ARAB MUSLIM HEAVYWEIGHTS	Turkey - Strongly condemned strikes - Backed Iran politically	Pakistan - Condemned attacks - Expressed solidarity with Iran	Indonesia - Called for ceasefire and diplomacy - No material role	Malaysia - Condemned aggression - Advocated dialogue	Bangladesh - Expressed concern - Called for restraint		
KEY BEHAVIOUR DURING CONFLICT	Participated in or enabled offensive actions against Iran (reported)	Provided bases, access, airspace, refuelling and logistical support to US forces	Maintained neutrality; avoided material support to either side	Engaged in mediation, diplomacy or public calls for de-escalation	Publicly aligned with Iran or strongly critical of US–Israel actions		
DRIVING PRIORITIES	- Security guarantees from US - Technology & arms access - Counter Iran's regional influence	- Preserve US security umbrella - Ensure regime security - Counter Iraq & defence ties with West	- Avoid entanglement - Protect national stability - Keep diplomatic space open	- Regional stability - Diplomacy and mediation role - Avoid escalation	- Opposition to US/Israel policies - Solidarity with Iran / Axis of Resistance		

LEGEND

Confrontation (Reported) Logistical Accommodation (Enabling US Operations) Strategic Balancing (Neutral / Limited Role) Active De-escalation (Mediation & Dialogue) Iran-Aligned / Critical of US-Israel

NOTES

- Positions reflect state behaviour between 28 Feb – 17 June 2026.
- "Reported" indicates actions based on media and official statements.
- Classifications represent predominant posture, not exhaustive of all actions.

Notable statistics:

- Saudi Arabia spent \$83 billion on defence in 2025, equal to 6.5% of GDP (Visual Capitalist, March 2026)
- All 6 GCC states were struck by Iranian missiles during the conflict (Arab Center DC, March 2026)
- The UAE bore the brunt of Iranian strikes, with energy facilities, airports, and hotels targeted (Times of Israel / Wall Street Journal, May 2026)

Key Finding 3: Why Arab States View Iran as a Strategic Rival, not a Co-religionist

The theological premise of Muslim unity assumes that shared faith creates shared interests. The history of Iran's relationship with Arab states contradicts this assumption - and does so not on theological grounds, but on the harder terrain of geopolitical competition.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry intensified sharply following Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. As Religion Unplugged explained in its March 2026 analysis: "Saudi Arabia is a Sunni-majority kingdom that positions itself as a leading power in the Arab and Sunni Muslim world. Iran is a Shia-majority republic that sees itself as a leader of Shia communities and as a revolutionary force challenging Western influence in the region." Since 1979, the two states have competed for regional influence across a series of proxy conflicts.

Scholars at the Baker Institute for Public Policy (Rice University) have argued that this rivalry is primarily a balance-of-power contest rather than a theological one: "Saudi Arabia and Iran are simply playing a balance of power game, driven not by age-old sectarian hatreds but rather by regional geopolitics." The salience of Sunni-Shia framing in regional politics, the Baker Institute notes, is substantially a bottom-up phenomenon arising from the collapse of state authority in places like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen - not something simply manufactured in Riyadh or Tehran. The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) similarly observes that the threat Iran poses to Saudi Arabia "is less about Tehran's ability to stir up opposition among Saudi Shia and more about Tehran's geopolitical reach into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and, prospectively, the smaller Gulf monarchies - a balance of power threat more than a challenge to domestic regime security and identity."

Academic research published in the IE University International Public Affairs Review confirms that "sectarian narratives are instrumentalized to legitimise broader geopolitical objectives, including political dominance, economic control, and military pre-eminence." Concretely, Iran's "Axis of Resistance" - its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen (who repeatedly struck Saudi infrastructure in prior years), and Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq - represents a strategic encirclement of Arab Gulf states that they regard as existentially threatening regardless of any shared Islamic identity.

It is worth noting that the instrumentalization cuts both ways. Iran's own invocation of Islamic solidarity has always been selective: Tehran appeals to the *ummah* when seeking regional support against the

West, while simultaneously cultivating Persian nationalism at home and pursuing a distinctly national - often ethnonational framed - set of strategic interests through its proxy network. Arab governments have long registered this asymmetry: the state demanding pan-Islamic solidarity in 2026 was the same state whose proxies had been striking Arab Muslim infrastructure for a decade. Solidarity claims made instrumentally invite instrumental responses.

The Middle East Institute has argued that the regional split is, at its core, “a geopolitical battle between states and groups aligned with the West and interested in preserving the regional status quo” versus an Iranian-led bloc seeking to transform that order. The Geopolitics journal reinforces this point: “From a realist perspective, it is misleading to interpret these alliances through purely sectarian lenses.” Qatar, for instance, maintains ties with Iran on certain issues while being a core member of the US-aligned GCC. Turkey competes intensely with Iran despite both being non-Arab Muslim states. Sectarian labels simplify what is fundamentally a multipolar great-power competition.

Iran’s decision to strike civilian infrastructure across Arab Muslim states during the 2026 conflict - airports, hotels, oil refineries, residential buildings - did nothing to suggest a common Islamic identity worth defending. For Gulf policymakers, Iran had demonstrated precisely what they had long argued: that it was a strategic threat wearing Islamic clothing.

Key Finding 4: The OIC - Declarations Without Enforcement

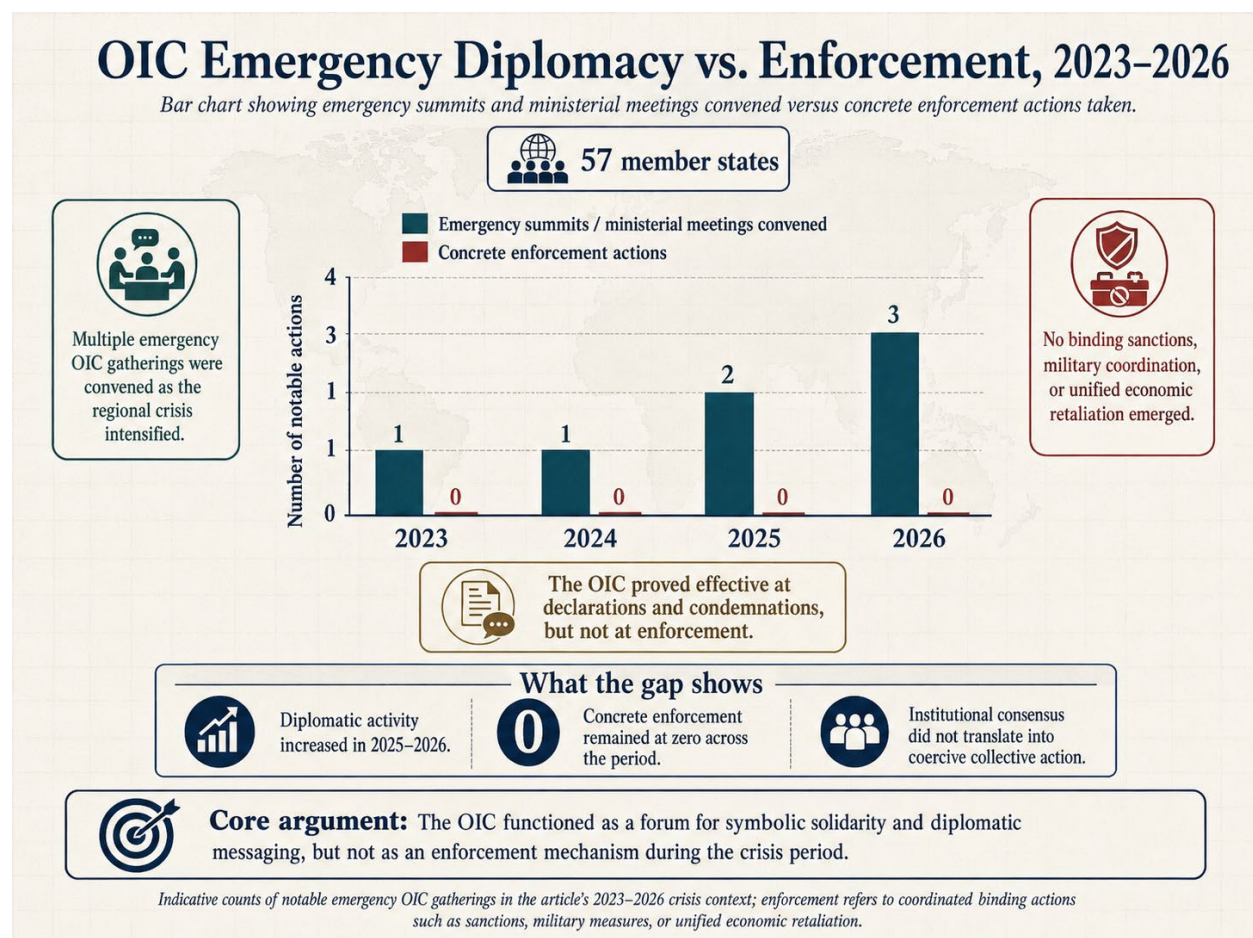
The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which brings together 57 member states representing the world’s Muslim-majority nations, is constitutionally mandated to promote Islamic solidarity. The 2025–2026 conflict tested that mandate more severely than any event in the organisation’s history - because the conflict’s opening hours produced exactly the kind of events pan-Islamic solidarity exists to answer. The killing of Iran’s Supreme Leader, the most senior religious-political authority of the world’s largest Shia state, and the deaths of roughly 170 civilians at a girls’ school near Bandar Abbas - both during Ramadan - generated waves of protest and grief across Muslim publics from Jakarta to Rabat. If the OIC could not convert that sentiment into collective action, nothing could.

It could not. During the initial June 2025 Twelve-Day War, Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi addressed an emergency OIC meeting in Istanbul, telling delegates that the United States had been involved in Israel’s “aggression” from “day one.” Al Jazeera reported that at the subsequent SCO/Arab League summit in Doha in July 2025, leaders declared: “We condemn the military strikes against the Islamic Republic of Iran since 13 June 2025,” adding concern over “deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure and peaceful nuclear facilities.” Al Jazeera noted that the declaration was described as “a diplomatic victory for Tehran, which has received limited regional or global support.” The OIC also convened multiple emergency summits and ministerial meetings - in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Istanbul - to condemn Israeli and US strikes, and issued its strongest-worded condemnations after the February 2026 decapitation strike and the Bandar Abbas casualties.

The UN Security Council acknowledged the OIC's ministerial contact group on de-escalation as "a valuable contribution to international and UN efforts." Yet what the OIC demonstrably could not do was compel any member state to take material action in Iran's defence, impose sanctions on the US or Israel, provide Iran with diplomatic cover that translated into policy change, or coordinate a unified economic response - even after the killing of a sitting Supreme Leader.

Iranian officials consistently used OIC platforms to call for far more. Iran International reported that former IRGC chief Mohsen Rezaei warned at an OIC gathering that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq could face future Israeli attacks if the body failed to act decisively, calling for an "Islamic NATO." A senior Iranian cleric called for "a joint Islamic army operating under a single command." These appeals went unanswered.

The gap between OIC rhetoric and action reflects structural constraints that no summit can easily overcome. The OIC was never designed as a military alliance or an enforcement body. Its decisions require consensus among 57 states with radically divergent foreign policy interests - some allied with the US, some with China or Russia, some hedging between all of them. When the very states being asked to act collectively are also the states hosting the military apparatus of the opposing power, collective action becomes arithmetically impossible.



Key Finding 5: Economic Dependencies and the Structural Constraints on Foreign Policy

The independence of any state's foreign policy is bounded by its economic vulnerabilities. For most Arab states in the Gulf, that calculus runs overwhelmingly toward the West.

The US–Saudi relationship is the paradigmatic case. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative - its plan to diversify away from oil revenues through Western investment, tourism, and technology - has required stable and productive relations with Washington. Even as Brookings noted that Saudi Arabia had scaled back aspects of Vision 2030 by early 2026, its leadership understood that confronting the United States over Iran would put the entire architecture of Western financial engagement at risk.

Gulf states host not only US troops but the financial institutions, reserve currencies, and trade relationships that underpin their sovereign wealth funds and development strategies. The UAE's position as a global financial hub - anchored by the Dubai International Financial Centre and Abu Dhabi's sovereign investment vehicles - is structurally dependent on maintaining integration with Western-dominated financial systems. Confronting Washington would amount to economic self-destruction.

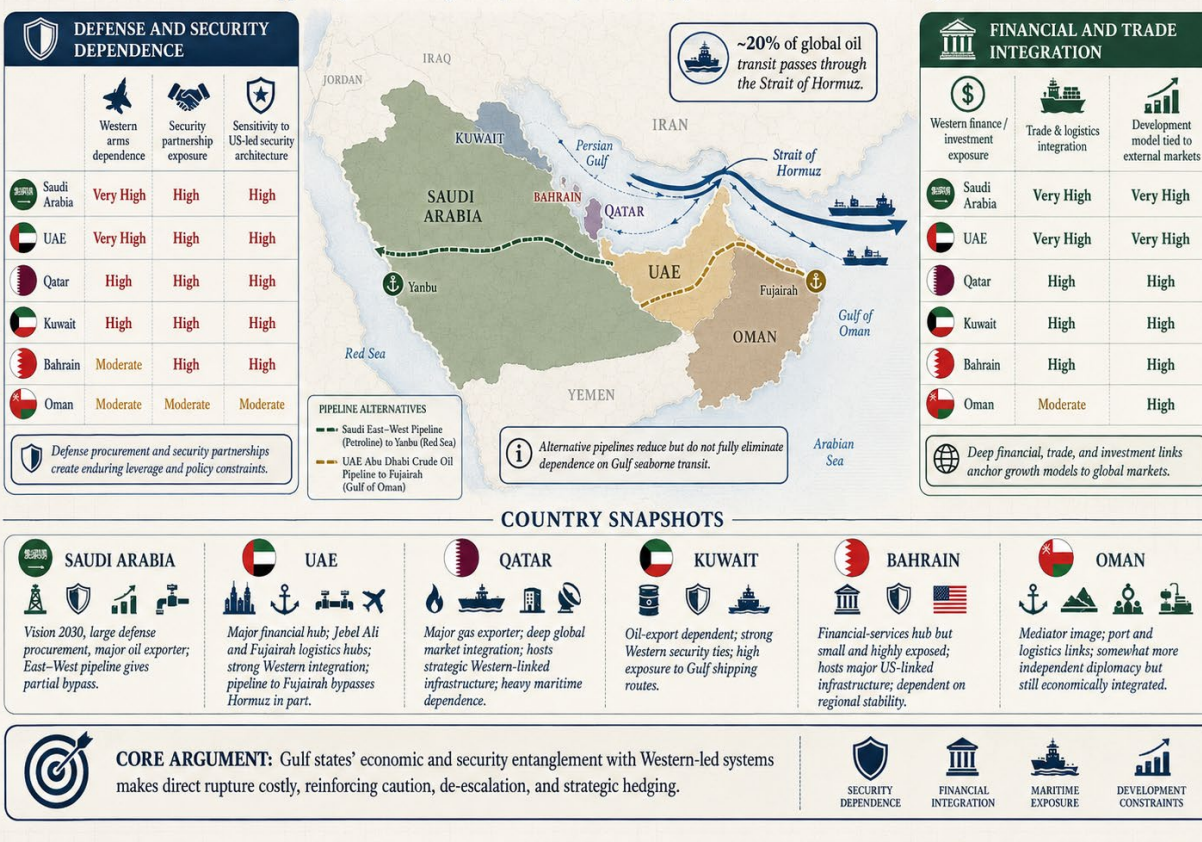
Arms dependency further constrains autonomy. Saudi Arabia's \$83 billion defence budget, according to Visual Capitalist, is substantially sourced from American and Western suppliers. The UAE's operational use of Israeli-made Iron Dome missile interceptors during the 2026 conflict - confirmed by US Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz, as reported by The Soufan Center - illustrates how deeply the defence technology and intelligence-sharing relationships have become embedded. These are not merely transactional arrangements; they represent institutional dependencies that would take years to dismantle.

The Strait of Hormuz dimension added an additional structural irony during the 2026 conflict. Iran's closure of the strait - through which 20% of the world's oil passes, according to CFR reporting - damaged GCC states' own economic interests as much as it hurt the West. The Arab Center DC noted that Saudi Arabia and the UAE possess alternative pipeline routes, but "neither pipeline could fully replace the seaborne transit of oil from terminals inside the Gulf without reducing natural gas export capacity." The economic damage from Iran's retaliatory strategy was therefore as much a blow to the Arab states as to Iran's principal adversaries.

The same structural logic operated beyond the Islamic frame entirely. BRICS - which by 2026 counted both Iran and the UAE as members - was reportedly paralysed for the duration of the war, unable to issue more than anodyne calls for restraint because two of its members sat on opposing sides of the conflict. The episode is a clean illustration of the article's core claim: it is not Islamic institutions specifically that fail under these conditions, but any multilateral body whose members' security architectures point in opposite directions.

Gulf State Economic Ties to Western Powers

Arms suppliers, financial integration, trade exposure, and pipeline alternatives to the Strait of Hormuz.



Key Finding 6: Beyond the Gulf - The Non-Arab Muslim Heavyweights

A thesis about “Muslim unity” cannot be tested only on the GCC - the six states most militarily entangled with Washington and therefore most likely to confirm it. The harder cases are the non-Arab heavyweights: Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Egypt, and Malaysia, which together account for the great majority of the world’s Muslim population and include its only nuclear-armed Muslim state. Their behaviour during the war tested the thesis on states with far less direct dependence on US basing - and confirmed it anyway.

Pakistan is the most instructive case. It fields the largest military in the Muslim world and the only Muslim nuclear arsenal, and its public reacted to the Khamenei killing and the Bandar Abbas strike with some of the largest demonstrations anywhere. Yet Islamabad’s response never moved beyond condemnation and calls for restraint at the OIC and UN. The reasons were structural, not sentimental: a fragile, IMF-dependent economy; deep financial reliance on the very Gulf monarchies aligned with Washington; a long and unstable border with Iran complicated by Baloch insurgency on both sides; and a security establishment whose overriding strategic focus remains India. A state in that position does not go to war with the United States over solidarity - however genuine the sentiment on its streets.

Turkey, a NATO member hosting US asset at Incirlik, condemned the strikes in strong terms and positioned itself - alongside Oman and Qatar - as a mediator, keeping channels open to Tehran while carefully avoiding any material breach with Washington. Ankara's posture reflected its long-standing pattern: rhetorical leadership of Muslim causes combined with strict subordination of that rhetoric to Turkish strategic and economic interests, including its own regional competition with Iran in Syria, Iraq, and the Caucasus. Egypt, dependent on US military aid and preoccupied with domestic economic crisis, confined itself to diplomatic statements. Indonesia and Malaysia - the demographic heart of the Muslim world - issued sharp condemnations, supported OIC and UN initiatives, and did nothing material, their foreign policies anchored in ASEAN non-alignment and trade relationships with both the West and China.

The pattern across all five is uniform and telling: the further a Muslim-majority state sat from the Gulf's security architecture, the freer it was to condemn - and the less it was willing or able to do. Distance purchased rhetorical latitude, not material solidarity. The thesis survives its hardest available test.

Muslim Unity vs. Nation-State Interests: A Geopolitical Analysis

The analytical framework most useful for understanding the 2026 conflict's revelation of Muslim disunity is not theological but structural - rooted in the logic of the modern nation-state system and the enduring influence of realist international relations theory.

The Westphalian principle - that states are the primary actors in international relations, that sovereignty is territorial, and that states' primary obligation is to their own security - has governed the Muslim world as much as any other. States that emerged from colonialism inherited borders, bureaucracies, militaries, and economies that created distinct national interests, all of which compete with and typically override religious solidarity when crises unfold.

Realist theory predicts exactly what occurred: states aligned according to their security interests and existing alliance structures, not their religious identity - and, crucially, states with *different* interests behaved differently. Saudi Arabia's fear of Iranian encirclement, tempered by its 2023 rapprochement and its Vision 2030 exposure, produced hedged accommodation. The UAE's harder threat assessment and reported confidence in a transformative outcome produced (on the available reporting) covert confrontation. Qatar, which hosts Al Udeid Air Base and was struck by Iranian missiles, worked for de-escalation. Pakistan, structurally insulated from the Gulf but economically dependent on it, condemned and abstained. Four Muslim states, four positions - each precisely legible from its security and economic situation, noneligible from its religion.

The CFR's Steven Cook captured this dynamic precisely: Gulf leaders "did not want the war and have privately expressed frustration with the United States and Israel for causing chaos in the region, but they have not pressured President Donald Trump to stop the US attacks." The logic was blunt: as Cook wrote,

Gulf leaders now need the United States to prevail, because “stopping short of that would be existential to the Gulf states’ development model.”

Liberal institutionalist theory offers a partial counternarrative - the OIC represents exactly the kind of multilateral institution that, over time, could theoretically build genuine collective action capacity. But institutions without enforcement mechanisms cannot overcome the centripetal pull of national interests in genuine security crises.

The constructivist dimension, meanwhile, is where the 2026 war was at its most dramatic - and this article’s central tension lives there. Islamic identity functioned powerfully at the level of public opinion: the killing of a Supreme Leader during Ramadan and the deaths of 170 schoolgirls’ worth of civilians at Bandar Abbas produced genuine, widespread, and in places destabilising public outrage across the Muslim world, including in the very states quietly coordinating with the strikers. The gap between outraged publics and accommodating governments - protesters in Karachi, Amman, and Kuala Lumpur demanding action their governments had structurally foreclosed - is the lived reality of the ummah-versus-state tension. The Al Jazeera opinion piece on Iran’s strikes observed the “moral asymmetry” at play: Iran was attacking the very neighbours it needed to mediate an end to the conflict. But popular sentiment and elite foreign policy decision-making are rarely the same thing in the region’s political systems - and in 2026 they diverged as sharply as they ever have.

Counterarguments and Alternative Viewpoints

Intellectual honesty requires engaging seriously with perspectives that complicate the dominant narrative.

Iran is not a passive victim. Iran’s decision to fire missiles at civilian infrastructure in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Jordan - states that had explicitly tried to remain outside the conflict - fundamentally undermined any claim on Muslim solidarity, however grievous its own losses. Al Jazeera’s own opinion columnists argued that Iran’s strikes on Gulf neighbours constituted “a strategic miscalculation of historic proportions” and “a profound moral and legal failure that risks poisoning relations for generations to come.” Saudi Arabia’s 2023 diplomatic rapprochement with Iran, and the Gulf states’ consistent restraint during the June 2025 Twelve-Day War, demonstrated a genuine effort to avoid confrontation that Iran’s retaliatory strategy ultimately punished.

Nation-state logic has legitimate defenders. Many Muslim scholars and policymakers have argued that the ummah as a political unit is a utopian ideal rather than a viable framework for 21st-century governance. States have real obligations to their citizens - economic, security, developmental - that cannot be subordinated to abstract pan-Islamic solidarity without harming the people those governments are supposed to serve.

Neutrality as a form of solidarity. Turkey’s maintenance of diplomatic channels, Oman’s prior mediation role, and Qatar’s balancing act between hosting Al Udeid and maintaining pragmatic ties with Tehran

can each be read not as cowardice but as deliberate efforts to preserve diplomatic space for de-escalation. These represent a different theory of solidarity - one operating through restraint rather than confrontation.

The OIC's limitations are structural, not merely political. The OIC was not designed as a collective defence organisation. Criticizing it for failing to function as one misrepresents its mandate and conflates symbolic solidarity with material power. Its role in maintaining a forum for Muslim-majority governments, producing diplomatic statements, and establishing contact groups is real, if modest.

Post-conflict recalibration may produce lasting change. The Arab Center DC observed that the 2026 war has “eased, if not ended, the deepening rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which now share anger at Tehran for attacking Gulf states despite their refusal to facilitate or support the US campaign, not to mention their anger at Washington for plunging the region into such unnecessary turmoil.” The Brookings Institution noted that the war has “further intensified existing regional rivalries, including among Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE,” and that “further Arab normalization with Israel has become less likely.” Paradoxically, being dragged into an unwanted war may accelerate calls for greater Arab strategic autonomy - not toward Iran, but away from Washington's unilateralism.

Conclusion: The Future of Muslim Cooperation

The 2025–2026 Iran–USA conflict did not destroy the concept of Muslim unity - but it exposed its current limits with unusual clarity. A sitting Supreme Leader was killed; roughly 170 civilians died at a school; both events occurred during Ramadan; publics across the Muslim world erupted - and no Muslim-majority government took material action in Iran's defence. The ummah as a lived religious community remains spiritually and culturally powerful. As a framework for coordinating the foreign policies of 57 sovereign states with divergent security arrangements, regional rivalries, and economic dependencies, it has yet to develop the institutional or material infrastructure necessary to function.

The OIC issued declarations. Arab states hosted American infrastructure, coordinated with Israeli missile defence systems, and - on unconfirmed but credible reporting - struck Iranian territory in covert operations, even as Riyadh simultaneously denied Washington its airspace and pressed Abu Dhabi to stand down. Iran retaliated against Muslim-majority countries across the entire Gulf. When hostilities ended on 17 June 2026 - after nearly four months of war and several failed ceasefires - the civilian populations of Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar had paid a price for alignments their governments had made, and in most cases had tried to avoid making.

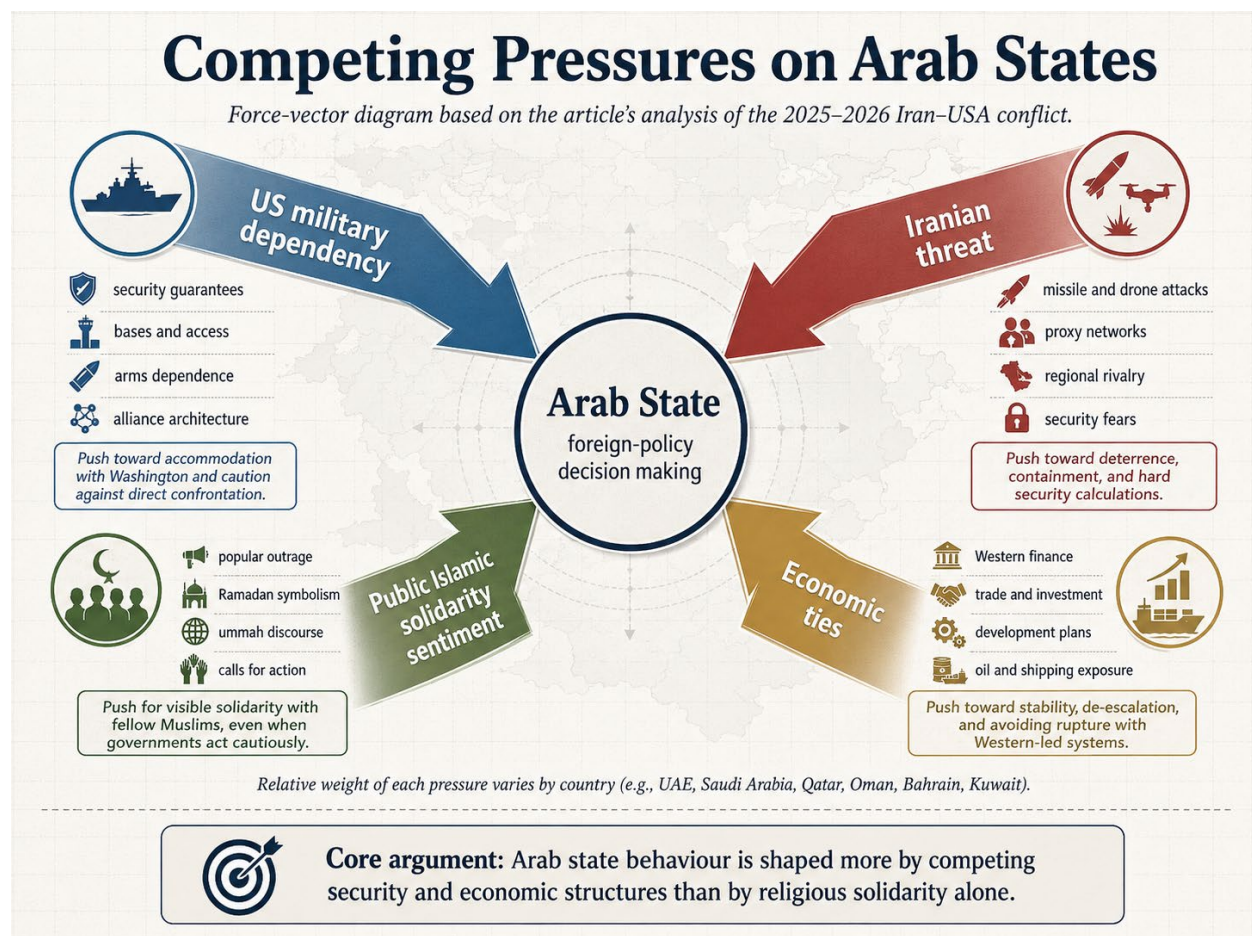
What this conflict suggests for the future is layered. In the near term, the GCC faces a significant strategic reckoning. As the Brookings Institution's analysis emphasised, “unintended consequences” have historically followed every US-led regime change operation in the Middle East, and the 2026 war - which left Iran leaderless but unreconciled - is unlikely to be an exception. The prospect of regional

reconfiguration - new security architectures, reduced dependence on the US footprint, greater GCC strategic cohesion - has moved from the theoretical to the urgent.

In the medium term, the question of whether Islamic institutions can evolve beyond declaratory diplomacy remains genuinely open. The calls from Iranian officials for an “Islamic NATO” reflect a real aspiration - but that aspiration founders on the structural reality that the states being asked to join it view Iran itself as one of the primary threats such a body would need to address.

In the long term, the tension between the Westphalian nation-state system and the pan-Islamic ideal will not be resolved by any single conflict. Until Muslim-majority states develop shared institutions with genuine authority, shared economic frameworks that reduce external dependency, and a resolution - or at minimum a managed equilibrium - of the Sunni–Shia geopolitical divide, appeals to Muslim unity will remain rhetorically powerful and politically weak.

The gap between the ummah and the state system is not a theological failure. It is a political one - and political problems, in principle, admit political solutions. Whether the 2026 conflict becomes the catalyst for that kind of rethinking, or simply another painful data point confirming the primacy of national interest, remains the most consequential open question in contemporary Muslim geopolitics.



Key Findings Summary

Theme	Finding
US Military Presence	30,000–40,000 US troops in the region; 8 permanent bases across Muslim-majority states including Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia
Decapitation & Civilian Toll	Opening strikes killed Supreme Leader Khamenei and senior officials; ~170 civilians killed at a girls' school near Bandar Abbas - during Ramadan - without triggering material collective action
Arab State Responses	The war split the Gulf: the UAE reportedly conducted covert offensive strikes on Iran (unconfirmed officially), while Saudi Arabia hedged - granting some access but denying airspace - and most GCC states pursued de-escalation; all 6 GCC states were struck by Iranian retaliation
Iran as Strategic Rival	The Saudi–Iran rivalry is primarily a balance-of-power contest rooted in geopolitical competition, not theology; Iran's own solidarity claims are selectively instrumental
OIC Effectiveness	Multiple emergency summits held; condemnations issued - including after the Khamenei killing; no enforcement mechanism or binding collective action achieved
Economic Dependency	Arms purchases, financial integration, and Western trade ties structurally constrain Arab foreign policy autonomy; BRICS was likewise paralysed with Iran and the UAE on opposing sides
Non-Arab Muslim States	Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia condemned the strikes but took no material action - distance from Gulf security architecture bought rhetorical latitude, not solidarity
Ummah vs. Nation-State	Realist alignment with existing security structures consistently overrides religious solidarity when genuine national interests are at stake; divergent interests produced divergent behaviour

Notable Statistics and Data Points

- 30,000–40,000 US troops in the Middle East as of early 2026 (Al Jazeera, February 2026)
- 8 permanent US military bases in Muslim-majority Middle Eastern states (Council on Foreign Relations, June 2025)
- ~170 civilians killed in the missile strike on a girls' school near Bandar Abbas, 28 February 2026
- 110 days of hostilities, 28 February – 17 June 2026, spanning several failed ceasefire attempts
- \$83 billion - Saudi Arabia's 2025 defence budget, equal to 6.5% of GDP (Visual Capitalist, March 2026)
- 20% of global oil transit passes through the Strait of Hormuz, targeted during the conflict (CFR Global Conflict Tracker, 2026)

- 57 member states in the OIC, representing the Muslim world's collective diplomatic voice (Al Jazeera, September 2025)
- All 6 GCC states struck by Iranian retaliatory missiles during the 2026 conflict (Arab Center DC, March 2026)
- Saudi Arabia agreed to grant the US access to King Fahd Air Base while denying use of Prince Sultan Air Base and Saudi airspace (Bloomberg, March 2026)
- The UAE reportedly struck Iran dozens of times with warplanes and drones, coordinated with US and Israeli intelligence - reports the Emirati government did not confirm (Times of Israel / Wall Street Journal, May 2026)

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