

Trump must not abandon Gulf allies to Iranian hegemony

By Bradley Martin | Liram Koblenz-Stenzler

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If President Donald Trump backs down at this point in the war, it will leave the [Gulf States](#) to face a [more radicalized](#) and dangerous Iran seeking to impose its will on the [Muslim world](#).

After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Osama bin Laden offered to defend Saudi Arabia using his network of jihadist fighters rather than relying on the U.S. Shocked at the arrival of the Americans, the terrorist leader condemned what he saw as an "occupation" of American "crusader forces" in the Muslim holy land.

Echoes of this logic can be heard in Iran's recent call for Middle Eastern countries to form a military alliance that excludes the [U.S. and Israel](#).

"We must unite to guarantee our security and move towards a collective security charter based on Islam and the Quran as a reference," Ebrahim Zolfaghari, a spokesman for Iran's Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters (the unified combatant command headquarters of the Iranian Armed Forces), said recently. The video message addressed to the Arab and Islamic world also said that Iran is at the forefront of defending the Islamic nation.

Iranian representatives have responded to the U.S. proposal for a ceasefire with a [list of demands](#) that include: the closure of all American military bases in the Gulf, reparations for attacks on Iran, the lifting of all sanctions on Iran, permitting Iran to keep its missile program, and a new order for the Strait of Hormuz where Iran would [collect fees](#) from ships that transit the waterway as Egypt does with the Suez Canal.

Iran seeks to expand its influence across the region, [including through proxies](#) such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. This is why Iran has told intermediaries that any ceasefire deal must secure an end to the war on Iran and other

“resistance groups” in the region. Much like Bin Laden, Iran seeks to spread its influence without constraint and reduce the presence of U.S. forces in the region.

This puts the Gulf States in a dangerous position. For years, these countries have maintained a strategy of “strategic ambiguity” when it comes to Iran. While relying on the American security umbrella due to shared concerns about Iran’s regional ambitions, the Gulf States are also exposed to risks of escalation due to the ongoing war in large part because they are hosting U.S. military bases.

But Iranian strikes have [not been limited](#) to U.S. military targets. The United Arab Emirates bore the heaviest initial Iranian assault by absorbing more than 150 missiles and 500 drones in the first 48 hours of the war. Qatar, despite its role as a mediator in U.S.-Iran talks, suffered strikes on the hub of its LNG export infrastructure and its natural gas field. Strikes on Kuwait killed four soldiers and four civilians, strikes on Bahrain killed three civilians and strikes on Saudi Arabia killed one civilian and one U.S. Army soldier. This war has demonstrated that no Gulf State can sustain genuine strategic autonomy in a conflict involving the U.S., Israel and Iran.

Energy markets add another layer to this calculation. Rising concerns over [supply disruptions](#) have increased pressure on Washington to de-escalate.

But Saudi Arabia and other Gulf producers are not passive actors. Their ability to adjust output and reassure markets can help contain [price volatility](#), even during periods of tension.

Energy concerns are influencing the debate in Washington, but they are not the only factor. Recent reports that Saudi Arabia has urged Washington to continue the campaign against Iran suggest that some Gulf states are beginning to move beyond managing risk toward shaping outcomes.

Can the U.S. truly risk abandoning its Gulf State allies and energy resources to Iranian hegemony in pursuit of a [ceasefire deal](#)? What would the effects of a more radical Iran that is increasingly convinced it is winning be on the Gulf States that are now forced to take sides? When considering these questions, the U.S. must consider what may have happened if Saudi Arabia accepted Bin Laden’s offer.

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