5

France's Gulf Moment: Between Momentum and Commitment

Souhire Medini

Operation Epic Fury, launched by the United States (US) and Israel against Iran in February 2026, found European and Gulf states, both allies of Washington, sharing a common approach. They sought to counter Iran's attacks while maintaining a defensive posture by refusing to participate in US and Israeli military operations—a challenging tension to navigate. This convergence was evident as early as 5 March 2026, in a meeting between European ministers and their counterparts from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).[1]

Since then, a situation of "neither war nor full peace" has intermittently exposed the Gulf countries to attacks from Iranian missiles and drones. This new reality is likely to reinforce the Gulf countries' willingness to diversify their partnerships by adding 'layers' to their protection architecture. However, neither European nor GCC countries aim to diminish the US's engagement in the region. Instead, their objective is to encourage Washington to use its power and influence in a way that accounts for their own interests.

As long as the US remains the primary security guarantor in the Middle East, their rapprochement with Europe is the least politically costly option for GCC countries. Unlike engagement with China, this friendly hedging does not antagonise Washington. For Europeans, this is an attempt to position themselves as a "credible pillar within a 'US-plus' security framework."[2] Such a development would support the burden sharing that the current US administration insists on.

Besides a genuine common will to enhance 'bloc-to-bloc' cooperation between the European Union (EU) and GCC, the reality is that when the Gulf region called for military assistance needed for national defence, only individual European member states could offer it. In a way, the war with Iran has underscored the need for a more flexible strategy based on state-to-state cooperation.[3] Against this backdrop, France may have emerged from the war as the natural leader for a deeper Europe-Gulf strategic partnership. To confirm and solidify its position as the preferred European security partner in the Gulf region, Paris will have to demonstrate that its commitments are reliable in the long run.

A "French Momentum" After the Iran War?

During the 40-day war on Iran, France was the European country that provided the most rapid and visible support to the Gulf countries. Despite not being directly involved in Operation Epic Fury, the French military used its capabilities, including Rafale fighter jets, airborne radar capabilities, and anti-aircraft defence systems, to defend the Gulf countries that requested assistance. Official reports have not revealed the degree of French assistance to the Gulf countries, but it is worth noting that French President Emmanuel Macron himself publicly highlighted France's swift reaction and how it shot down several drones in the initial hours of the conflict.[4] French ambassadors in the region echoed these remarks.[5] Some of these assets were already deployed in service of ongoing military exercises or operations, reflecting the strong military ties between France and its Gulf partners. Based on these developments, the belief that the war has reinforced France's momentum in the Gulf is a common perception among French senior officials.

France's swift reaction was enabled by a network of bilateral agreements formalised before the war. This reflects a decades-old strategy of strengthening ties with the Gulf partners, particularly in defence. The strategy gained traction following France's intervention during the 1979 attack against Makkah's Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia. France's role at that time was seen as crucial, and it helped to establish a relationship of trust.[6] France has maintained a permanent naval, air, and ground presence in the UAE since 2009, including a naval base, an air base in Al Dhafra, and a land training centre.

Over the past decades, French arms sales to the Gulf countries have increased, the Rafale being the main selling product in France's defence procurements. In 2021, the UAE Armed Forces signed an order for 80 Rafale fighter jets, which was presented as an "undeniable tool for sovereignty and operational independence."[7] Qatar's acquisition of 36 Rafale fighter jets in 2019 also led to technology transfers[8] and training programmes for several hundred Qatari military personnel in France. Last February, a defence cooperation agreement was signed between France and Bahrain, just a few weeks before the start of the war.[9] In September 2026, the French president made public France's willingness to send military assets to protect energy sites in Saudi Arabia threatened by the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen. In doing so, he indicated that France remains ready to respond to requests for support from countries in the Gulf region.[10]

Other European countries have also played a role during the war and forged important ties with the Gulf states, but France has arguably the most comprehensive relationship. The United Kingdom (UK) has deep historical ties with the Gulf region, but its status outside of the EU prevents London from being part of EU-wide missions such as the Aspides mission in the Red Sea. Launched in 2024,[11] this mission is a manifestation of a European defence in the Middle East. Germany, for its part, is an industrial power that could help answer to the Gulf countries' armament needs, but it is not perceived as a reliable military power engaged in the region. Italy also plays an important role, particularly in the maritime domain, but it has neither developed a comparable network of bilateral defence agreements with the GCC countries nor built strong interdependencies through arms sales.

Between Caution and Commitment

During the war, the French government struggled to define the boundaries of its involvement. Within France, concerns were raised about the perceived discrepancy between the stated defensive posture and the deployment of substantial military resources.[12] Critics also questioned France's decision to allow American military support aircraft, though not combat aircraft, to be stationed at the Istres air base in France, following assurances from the US that these aircraft would not be involved in offensive operations in Iran.[13]

In comparison, Spain's decision to deny US forces permission to use joint military bases at Rota and Moron for any actions related to the war in Iran[14] was perceived as more consistent. France's approach illustrates the fine line Paris has sought to navigate: avoid being perceived by Iran as a belligerent, while demonstrating that it is a reliable and capable partner.

The decision of Paris to invest in this relationship to this level is driven by deep-seated strategic, political, and economic motivations. The Gulf countries have financial strength that is obviously of interest to France, as well as other European countries. As noted by the national agency serving the international development of the French economy at an event dedicated to the cooperation between France and GCC countries, "Gulf partners bring scale, rapid execution and an ambition to lead in adopting new technologies and services."[15] France also stands to gain serious and strategic partners in the political arena, and Paris is keen to coordinate with the Gulf countries on major political initiatives aimed at stability in the region. In 2025, France and Saudi Arabia jointly launched an initiative on the implementation of the two-state solution, which, despite US' initial skepticism, was later referenced in US President Donald Trump's Gaza peace plan.[16]

France and the GCC countries, therefore, have clear interests in deepening their relations with each other. To transform the perceived French momentum into concrete partnerships and confirm this trajectory, Paris will need to overcome several challenges.

Challenges Ahead

France's capacity to establish itself as the leading country in strengthening relations between France and the GCC is intrinsically linked to its ability to unite Europe and to continue doing so. France may drive and facilitate the Europe-Gulf strategic partnership, but a team effort will be needed. Despite repeatedly demonstrating that it can deploy meaningfully and rapidly in case of need, its military capacities are not those of the US or China. France is better placed than the rest of Europe to strengthen engagements with the GCC because of its credibility as a force multiplier, especially at the EU level.

During the war, France demonstrated this potential, particularly in the maritime domain. Its naval task force, comprising eight frigates, two helicopter carriers, and the flagship *Charles de Gaulle*, was deployed from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Red Sea, joined by the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, and Greece.[17] The Gulf countries will closely watch France's ability to leverage Europe's joint national security architecture and to strengthen a consensus in favour of European engagement in the Gulf

region's security. The launch of the Aspides mission was a valuable contribution to protecting freedom of navigation. Only Italy, France, and Greece, however, have deployed assets continuously since the start of this operation.[a]

One way to encourage broader European engagement in the Gulf region security would be to demonstrate that the Gulf countries have an interest in the security of the European continent, for example, by providing concrete support to Ukraine. Such mutual rapprochement could build on the relationships forged between Ukraine and several Gulf countries on drone cooperation during the war.[18] The trauma of Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait made the Gulf countries committed to the principle of sovereignty and respect for borders, which resonates with Russia's behaviour in Ukraine. The Gulf countries undoubtedly were angered to learn US officials' confirmation that Russia had covertly supported Iran during the war, including by providing satellite imagery and intelligence.[19] European officials would hope that this serves as a wake-up call. Greater convergence of perspectives could then help unlock additional European assets for future required collective response in the Gulf region.

Another challenge for France will be to reassure the Gulf countries that its growing network of alliances in the region stems from a cross-party consensus that no leadership change will dramatically impact. The Gulf states are also aware of how domestic politics could affect foreign relations and how serious political difficulties could jeopardise their confidence in the country as a solid and trustworthy partner. As France is due to hold pivotal presidential elections in 2027, the French government will need to reassure its partners in the Gulf that a change in leadership will not undermine the predictability that the Gulf states have found in Paris, at a time when the press regularly echoes the frustrations expressed by the region's leadership over the evolution of their security partnership with Washington.[20]

A Mirror Strategy: Reflecting Gulf Expectations in France's Ambitions

Being the engine of Europe's strategic rapprochement with the Gulf region implies that France should bridge the gap between what Europe offers and what the Gulf countries need. Europe is not the only geopolitical actor towards which the Gulf countries are turning in their quest for diversification. France and Europe are ultimately seeking strategic depth, defence export markets, and political partners to enhance stability in the region. To succeed, they will need to be shape these goals around what the Gulf countries expect from their future strategic partners.

a According to discussions the author of this essay had with European officials.

Souhire Medini *is a French diplomat and member of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs who was previously a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) from 2024 to 2026.*