



By Fateh M. Sami

Independent Researcher and Academic

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Gulf States in the Equation of Regional Crises: Wealth Amid Structural Dependence Exposed to Collapse

In recent decades, the Gulf states—including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman—have emerged as some of the wealthiest countries in the world, owing to their vast oil and gas resources (Bahgat, 2017; Reuters, 2026b). This wealth has enabled the development of modern infrastructure, luxurious urban projects, relative prosperity, and a notable role in the global economy. Yet, these states face a fundamental paradox at the core of their structure: alongside the accumulation of wealth, they remain exposed to levels of dependence and vulnerability that can become rapidly apparent—and even lead to systemic collapse—under crisis and war conditions (Barany et al., 2024).

The population of the Gulf region is approximately 64.5 million, with around 36 million in Saudi Arabia, 10 million in the UAE, 11 million in Jordan, 3 million in Qatar, and 4.5 million in Oman (Al-Saidi & Saliba, 2019). The age composition,

with 60 to 70 percent above the age of 20, indicates a significant active workforce. While there is some religious diversity, the overall demographic—particularly when accounting for migrant workers—is predominantly age-structured along major religious lines. In Bahrain, the population is roughly 1.5 to 1.6 million, with more than half comprising foreign workers, leaving the native population at about 700,000 to 800,000 (Al-Suwaidi, 2013).

Despite vast oil and gas wealth, these countries exhibit profound structural dependence. The first dimension of this dependence manifests in military security. Most Gulf states rely on strategic partnerships with the United States and other Western powers to ensure their security. The presence of foreign military bases, mainly US forces, the deployment of advanced defence systems such as Patriot and THAAD, and extensive arms procurement serve as deterrence mechanisms; yet they clearly indicate that national security is primarily outsourced (Barany et al., 2024). Although well-equipped, these militaries often depend on foreign training, support, and command structures. Consequently, in a protracted, high-intensity conflict, these states would face serious crises without direct external backing, and any reduction or withdrawal of such support could quickly lead to systemic collapse.

The second dimension is food security. The arid climate and limited water resources necessitate that these countries import most of their food. While manageable under normal conditions, reliance on global supply chains becomes a critical vulnerability in the event of war or disruption to maritime routes (RUSI, 2011; Blekking, Aassouli & Jureidini, 2024). Historical experience shows that in prolonged crises; food is not merely an economic commodity but a cornerstone of national security.

The third-dimension concerns water and essential infrastructure. A significant portion of consumed water is obtained through desalination—a process heavily dependent on energy and complex, centralized infrastructure (Al-Saidi & Saliba, 2019; *The perils of building big*, 2024). Despite technical sophistication, these facilities are highly vulnerable to technical failures or targeted attacks. In the event of large-scale conflict, damage to these systems could quickly disrupt daily life and create humanitarian crises.

Demographic structure further compounds vulnerability. In some Gulf countries, a large proportion of the population consists of foreign labourers. While this represents an economic advantage during stable periods, in crises it may lead to mass Labor outflows, service disruptions, and instability in economic cycles.

Economically, Gulf states possess substantial financial reserves and sovereign wealth funds invested in global markets. These assets allow them to manage short-term economic shocks; however, dependence on the international financial system—largely shaped by the influence of major powers—means that access to these resources may face serious constraints and disruption during severe tensions, limiting their practical effectiveness in crisis scenarios (Bahgat, 2017; Reuters, 2026b).

Geopolitically, rising tensions between Iran on one side, and the United States and Israel on the other, place these countries in a highly sensitive position—a reality already visible in current regional dynamics (Reuters, 2026a). They simultaneously host Western forces as part of the existing security architecture and face direct exposure to any continuation or escalation of conflict. The role of powers such as China and Russia is also noteworthy, although their interventions remain largely limited, indirect, and calculated (Barany et al., 2024).

In this context, a fundamental question arises: can wealth substitute for resilience in crisis? The reality is that wealth, while a critical tool for crisis management, does not determine outcomes. In prolonged and attritional conflicts, factors such as social cohesion, domestic capacity, political legitimacy, and readiness for sacrifice play a decisive role. Wealth may buy time, but it cannot guarantee results and security, and in many cases, its effective utilization during crises is severely constrained (Harvard NSJ, 2018).

In conclusion, the Gulf states stand at the intersection of “economic power” and “structural dependence.” While they have been able to maintain stability in the short term, long-term and extensive crisis scenarios—particularly under current high-tension conditions—pose challenges that cannot be resolved by wealth alone. Their future increasingly depends on other variables beyond financial resources, including genuine independence, internal capacity, and structural

resilience—factors that remain subject to considerable uncertainty, as well as the security of their neighbours, such as Iran, which is currently exposed to unjustified aggression (Reuters, 2026a) by the U.S. and Israel.

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