

Iran's gamble in the war could bring itself a new enemy

written by Asher Fredman | 08.03.2026

The joint US-Israeli operation against Iran has produced a development few could have imagined on the eve of the attack: the Islamic Republic of Iran has launched about 3,000 missiles and drones at Arab countries. No fewer than 1,668 launches were directed at the United Arab Emirates, a number far higher than the total fired at Israel.

Abu Dhabi has firmly denied Israeli reports that it struck an Iranian desalination facility in retaliation. Yet the questions now echoing across the Middle East remain unchanged: Why is Iran attacking its neighbors with such intensity? And are those countries about to respond militarily?

Iran's assault on the Gulf is not irrational. Rather, it is part of a calculated strategy aimed at coping with the combined power of the US and Israel and surviving the conflict. Leaders in Tehran understand that the country's defense systems are incapable of fully stopping the blows being dealt to them. Their hope, therefore, is to pressure US President Donald Trump into halting the war before the regime weakens to the point that domestic opponents might topple it.

To create that pressure, Iran is trying to undermine the foundations of what could be called the "Gulf model": the image of Gulf states, led by the United Arab Emirates, as islands of stability, prosperity and energy wealth. By disrupting oil flows and targeting major business hubs, the ayatollahs are betting that Gulf governments will pressure Washington to end the war prematurely.

This strategy of pressing Trump to halt the operation is also evident in other fronts. For example, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has begun echoing rhetoric that sounds as though it were lifted from the monologues of Tucker Carlson or Candace Owens, claiming that Trump is being "misled" by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and that this is a war of "Israel first" rather than "America first." The aim is clear: to stir opposition to the war among Trump's Republican base.

For now, however, Iran appears to be failing on both fronts. Polls in the US show

that between 77% and 84% of Republicans support the operation. In the Gulf, despite the economic damage, air defense systems have recorded impressive successes. The United Arab Emirates has reported an extraordinary interception rate of 99% for missiles and 94% for drones.

That success has fueled national pride in the Emirates and strengthened confidence in the country's military capabilities and national resilience. Public opinion across Gulf states has also hardened significantly against Iran.

The major question now is under what circumstances, if any, the United Arab Emirates will respond directly with military force. Abu Dhabi has remained cautious, wary of being dragged into a broader confrontation and uncertain whether the ayatollah regime might ultimately survive.

As Anwar Gargash, senior adviser to President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, put it: "The Emirates is in a state of self-defense. Any defensive step taken will be public and clear. Our goal is to stop this ongoing aggression, not to be drawn into escalation."

Still, there are signs that Emirati patience is running out. President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed sent a pointed message yesterday: "The United Arab Emirates has thick skin and bitter flesh. We are not easy prey."

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates possess advanced and well-trained air forces. If it becomes clear that the US and Israel are indeed determined to go all the way and bring down the rule of the ayatollahs, and if that determination is backed by sustained strikes against Iran's governing, military and internal security targets, the Emirates may decide to actively join the campaign.

The likelihood of such a move increases for one reason: even if the US and Israel destroy most of Iran's missile launch infrastructure, it will be far more difficult to eliminate Tehran's drone-launch capabilities entirely. That threat will continue to provoke the anger of Gulf states. In such a scenario, the United Arab Emirates would likely strike clearly defined military targets while seeking to minimize civilian casualties.

Such a step would cement Abu Dhabi's standing not only as a global economic and energy power but also as a regional military force capable of defending its sovereignty with offensive tools.

For Israel, this represents a historic opportunity to deepen security cooperation and advance the vision of a Middle Eastern strategic alliance that could reshape the region for generations to come.

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